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THE FUTURE OF
APEX LEGENDS

+10

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EDITOR'S NOTE

A GOOD TIME TO PLAY

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

MOST GAMERS I KNOW aren't just playing games all the time. Sure, every once in a while, I run into the kind of fan whose evenings are entirely consumed with playing – in that case, it's often one particular game above all others. But for the rest of us, gaming is entertainment we enjoy alongside a love of reading, movies, TV, music, or any number of other hobbies. It's one slice of the free-time pie, and for me, the percentage of the pie adjusts back and forth depending on what's out, what's good, and my mood.

We all have to make calls about what to do with our limited leisure opportunities. But there's no denying that right now is a remarkable time to be into the gaming scene. In just the last issue, we spent dozens of pages highlighting one of the most incredible years of releases in some time. 2023 was chock full of fantastic projects to explore, and even if you were playing all the time, it's unlikely you've had time to dig into everything.

That pace doesn't look to be slowing down. Even as we all try to catch up on the tremendous immersive experiences we may have missed last year, it seems the early weeks of 2024 are already offering a lot to capture gamers' attention. Our reviews for games like Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown (p. 72) and Tekken 8 (p. 75) suggest 2024 is off to an excellent start.

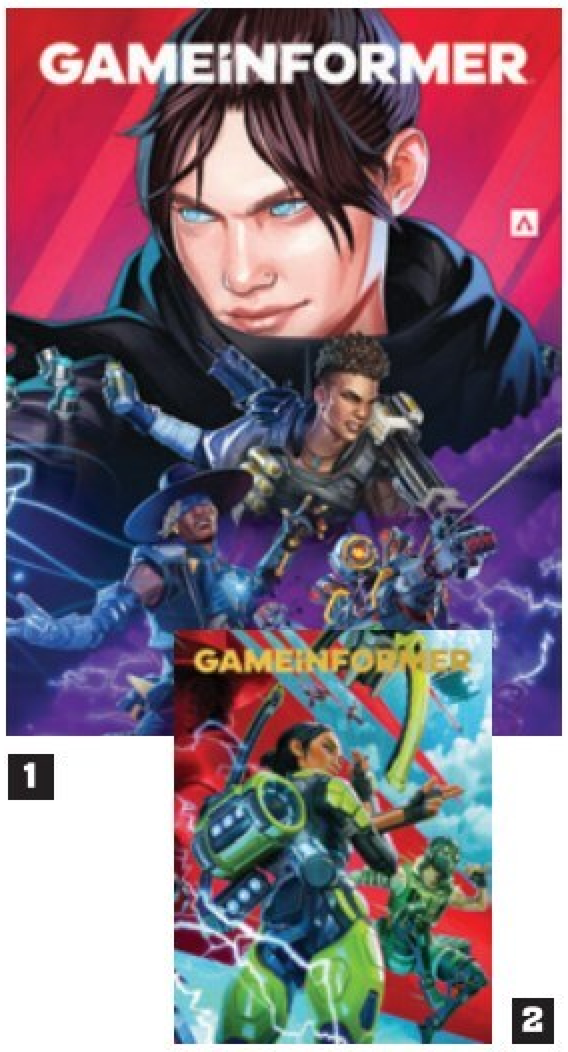
To confirm our suspicions about the promising months ahead, our team spent a big chunk of the last several weeks investigating what's on the horizon, curious about what we had to look forward to playing. We were so overwhelmed with what we found that we ended up with a list of well over a hundred games and then spent many subsequent hours chipping away at those selections to arrive at 50 upcoming titles we couldn't wait to play. This month, we detail what we discovered in over 25 pages of write-ups on our most anticipated games (p. 46).

When you see them all gathered together in that way, I suspect you'll come to the same conclusion we did: There's a lot to be excited about.

It may be an exceptionally fortunate time to have a wealth of games to play, since at least some of our other interests might be in for a rough stretch ahead. The recent Writer's Guild strike has resulted in an array of TV and movie projects getting pushed to a later release date, and a lot of my favorite shows or film franchises now seem frustratingly far away; I'm sure I'm not the only one who is sad to have longer waits ahead.

But in the meantime, maybe those gaps in new entertainment viewing will finally give me a chance to catch up on some of the games I've missed and stay on top of the dozens I can't wait to play from our list of anticipated titles.

Play well. Be well.



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APEX LEGENDS

Game Informer traveled to Vancouver, Canada to visit Respawn Entertainment and complete this month's deep dive into Apex Legends. On the fifth anniversary of the game's launch, we spoke with the development team about the road that brought the game to its current success and what lies ahead in the future. Across two exclusive cover images for our subscriber and gold editions, we see an array of the Legends that have helped to shape Respawn's enduring competitive shooter.

GAMEINFORMER

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Finds Cyclops more interesting than Wolverine

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Unlocked Inside's secret ending without help from the internet

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Jason Guisao

Contributor

When Apex Legends first launched, I was a bright-eyed *Game Informer* intern yearning for a new competitive shooter. Things were simpler then – morning shifts at Dinkytown's Lunds & Byerlys supermarket followed by a short, scenic bus ride to *GI*'s downtown office. Now, five years later, Apex has serendipitously reentered my life during a particularly rough patch. I'm so glad *GI* brought me in on this awesome cover story. While reading, I hope my deep admiration for the game is clear (and infectious)!

Laleh Azarshin

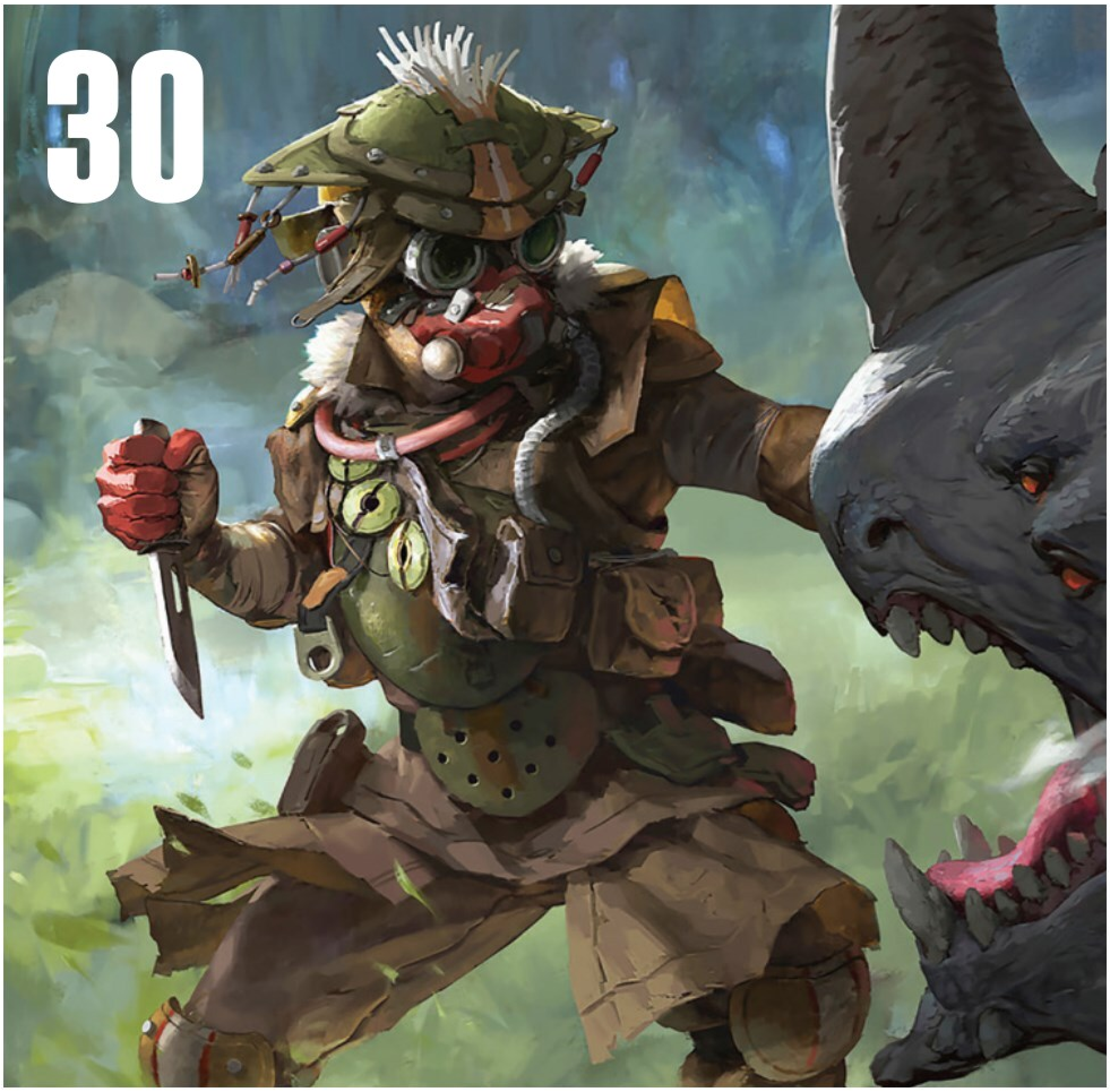
Lead Graphic Designer

Do you know who dances around like an imbecile when they accomplish the tiniest little thing? A not-quite-seven-year-old boy.

Over his winter break, my kid and I played through Portal 2's co-op together. There were times I didn't think we'd survive his frustration and plenty of moments I couldn't hear myself think. But what I'll remember are the big laughs and triumphs, and the joy of watching his confidence grow. After a tough year, diving into this old beloved game together propelled us forward. The improvement in our communication and connection is the real win.

Congratulations on completing that test. But something seems off. I wonder if all that dancing has some effect on you? Yeah baby, it does.

Contents



spotlight

30 **COVER STORY – APEX LEGENDS**

Apex Legends is about to receive one of its biggest overhauls since its release back in 2019. We traveled to Vancouver to talk to the team and play its upcoming update extensively, and we're ready to fill you in on all the details.

10 **CHANGING THE GAME**

Hip-hop is now 50 years old and, in the past year, has experienced some of its biggest gaming breakthroughs ever. We spoke with the people who had a hand in bringing hip-hop to video games over the past decades and look at what could come next.

40 **A RETURN TO FANTASY**

We checked out the opening hour of Unicorn Overlord from Vanillaware, the developer of 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim, and spoke to the team about its "rebirth of tactical fantasy RPGs."

46 **OUR MOST ANTICIPATED GAMES OF 2024 AND BEYOND**

Time waits for no one. 2023 may have just ended, but we already have our eyes on what's next. Read our giant list of all the games we can't wait to get our hands on over the next 12 months and beyond.

78 **THE EXUBERANCE OF BEING NIGHT SCHOOL STUDIO**

Since the release of its first game, Oxenfree, back in 2016, Night School Studio has been one of the most interesting indie developers out there. We talked to the team about its past, present, and hopeful future.

regulars

02 EDITOR'S NOTE // **03** STAFF SPOTLIGHT // **06** REPLIES
28 GEAR // **72** REVIEWS // **84** ONE LAST THING

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Replies

HIDDEN GEMS

I was excited to see Sephiroth on the cover of the recent issue [issue 362], but I actually spent the most time looking through all the 2023 games. I like seeing what you guys picked for the top 10 and which games were different in the reader picks. The thing I most look forward to every year is reading about the games I didn't know about and making a list of stuff to play after the holiday rush. I added Jusant, Tchia, and Dredge to what I'm going to play next, so thanks! **– Jean Cavell via email**

↳ *Each year, we really look forward to providing the best snapshot we can for the year as we get ready to turn our calendars over, and it's always satisfying to see it all come together. Our end-of-year coverage is a massive undertaking that involves seemingly endless debates and a ton of hard work, but hearing people write in to let us know we helped them find some new games to check out makes it all worth it. Jusant, Tchia, and Dredge were also pleasant surprises for many of our staff. While it sounds like you're all set with those three games from 2023, if you're looking for some games to watch for going forward, we'd recommend you get a head start on 2024 by visiting our feature of the most anticipated games on p. 46.*

IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES, IT WAS THE WORST OF TIMES

2023 may have been a big year for releases, but a terrible year for the industry as a whole, with more than 10,000 people laid off. Do you see 2024 following the same trend in trying to lay off and consolidate and add new, cheaper labor? Or will the industry see its mistake and bounce back with hiring? I guess this all depends on CEO's, Boards, and the chase for unobtainable profits. **– Zachary Pligge via Discord**

↳ *You're correct in pointing out that 2023 had one of the most incredible lineups of game releases in the history of this hobby we all love, but it also served as one of the worst years for the people who make them. Game developers, publishers, and media members were laid off in droves as corporations sacrificed employees in the endless pursuit of profit. While those changes may have satisfied the bottom line in the near-term, there's no way these moves don't cause reverberations for years to come. After all, with fewer employees at these companies, they simply cannot maintain at the rate we saw in years like 2023; by necessity, either the output levels will drop, or the quality will. That's not even taking into account the lower morale experienced by those remaining at the companies and the calculation every member of the industry will eventually need to make about whether staying in such an unstable field is worth the anxiety.*

But it is even more important to remember that the folks who were laid off were not just numbers in a spreadsheet; they were the people responsible for the actual products these companies sell. Meanwhile, in many cases, the executives who steered the companies toward this state escape the cuts scot-free – or worse, get a golden parachute severance package that allows them to transition to a high-ranking role at another corporation. And unfortunately, while this is the trend we would have loved to keep in the rear-view mirror, 2024 is already on pace to blow past the 2023 layoff numbers, as companies like Unity, Twitch, and Riot Games have cut a combined number of employees that reach past the 3,000 mark in just the first three weeks of the year. This is the highest-grossing entertainment industry on the planet coming off one of its best years to date, and yet this is the state we're in. It's clear we need a better path forward, because this simply cannot continue the way it has been going.

The Pulse

We found out what our community has been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. God of War Ragnarök ▲
2. Marvel's Spider-Man 2 ▲
3. Cyberpunk 2077 ▲
4. Baldur's Gate 3 ▲
5. Tekken 8 NEW RELEASE
6. Alan Wake 2 ▼
8. Lies of P ▲
8. The Last of Us Part II Remastered NEW RELEASE
9. Forza Motorsport ▲
10. Final Fantasy XVI ▲

Soundoff:

We asked our readers and community which gaming platform they think they'll use the most in 2024. Here are some of their responses!

I see myself using my PS5 the most in 2024. Finding the right parts at a good price is becoming difficult for building my up-to-date PC. With getting Baldur's Gate 3 for Christmas, Dragon's Dogma 2 on the horizon, and with more FFXVI DLC and *fingers crossed* Spider-Man 2 DLC, it's easily going to be my main system for another year. **– Derek M. via email**

Xbox. Game Pass is too good. Still the best controller, too.
– via Instagram

PS5. But I've been a primary PlayStation guy since 1998 and it'll probably be that way 'til I'm dead. **– via Instagram**

It's a tie between Nintendo Switch and PS5. Got a lot of deals during Christmas. **– via Instagram**

Gotta go with the Xbox Series X. Backwards compatibility is such a massive plus. So many generations of games on one console.
– via Instagram

Nintendo DS and Xbox 360 because they were neglected while I was at school. Throwback 2024! **– via Instagram**

↘
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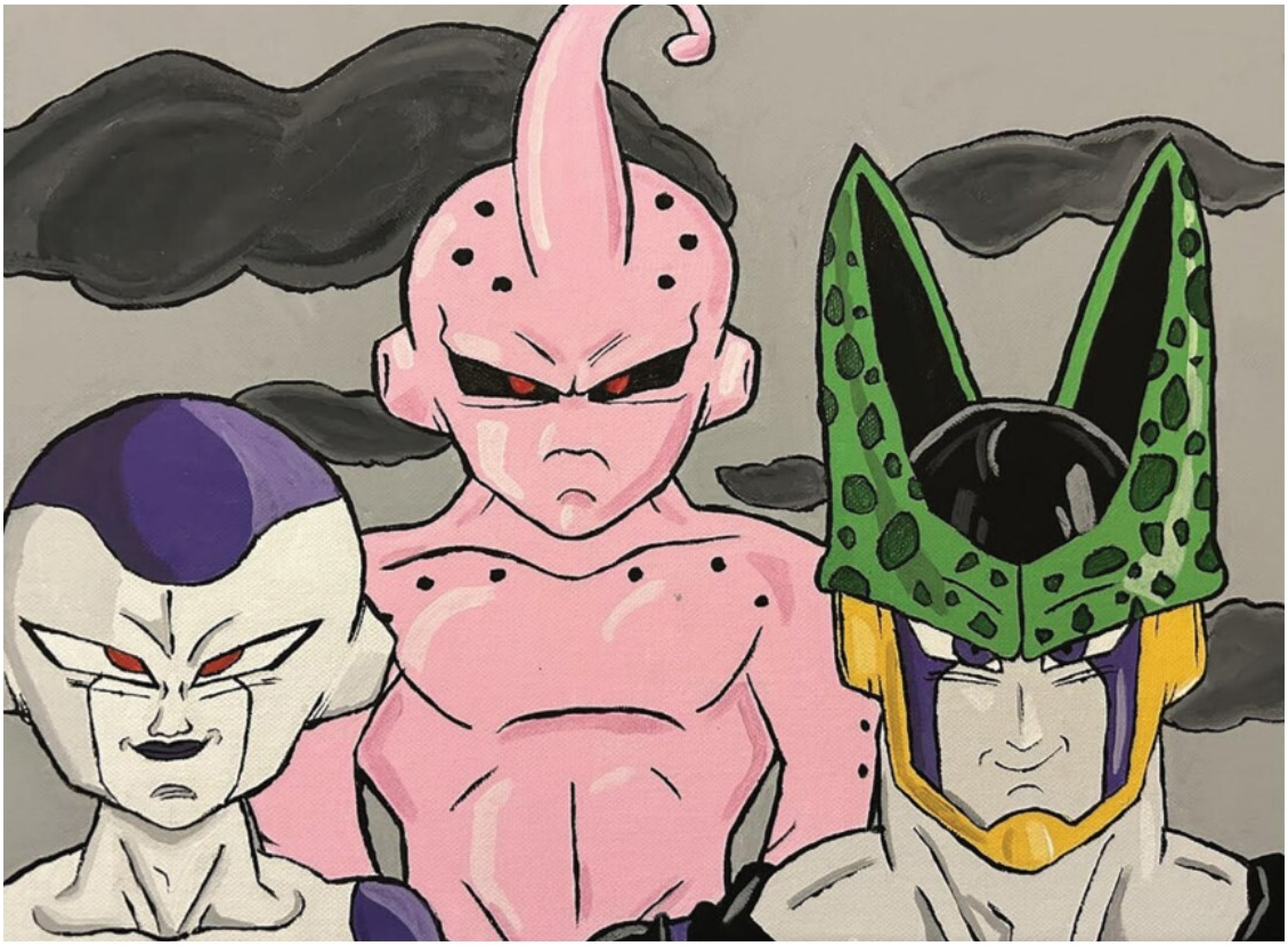

Reader art submission: Emily Melton

↘
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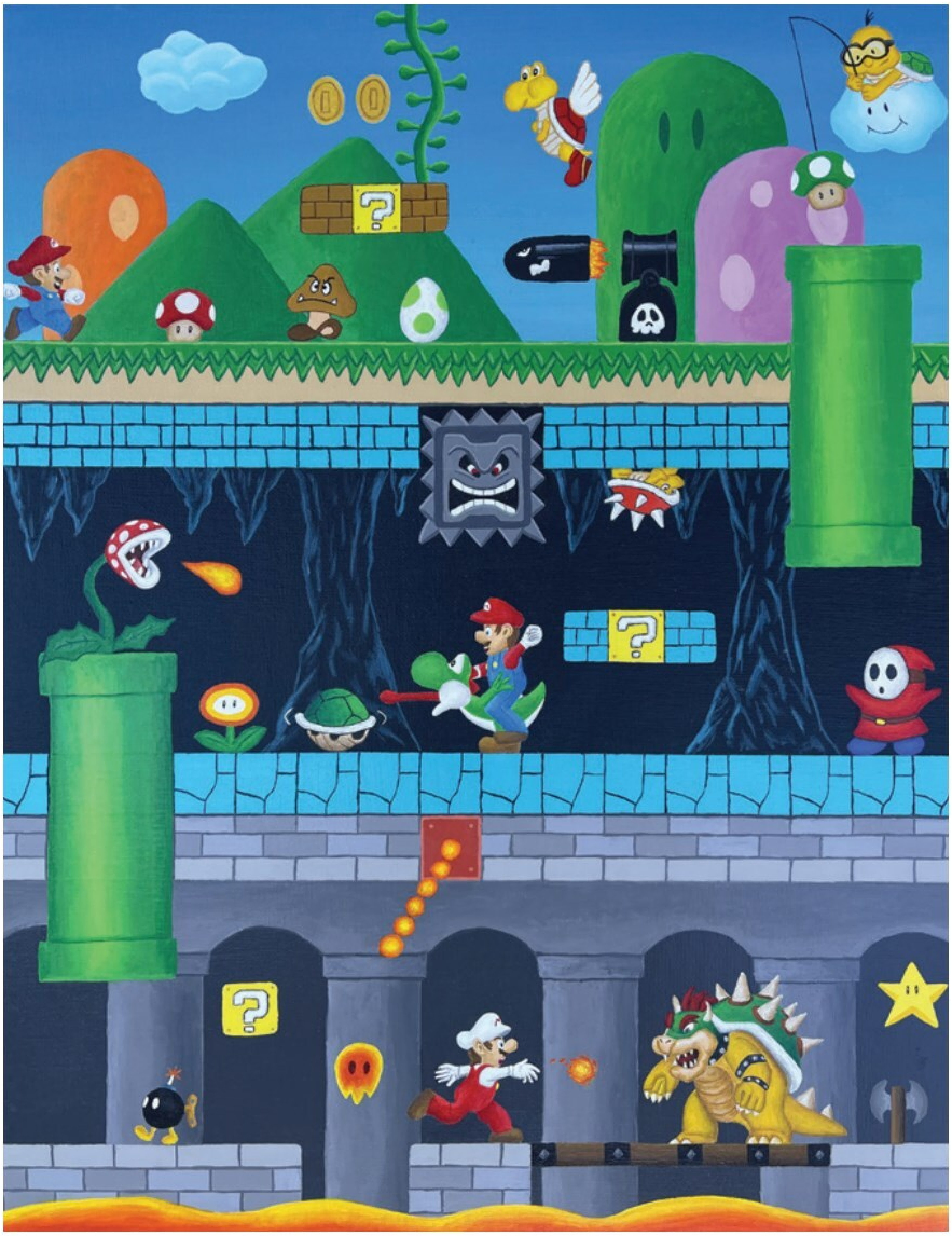
BACK TO THEIR ROOTS

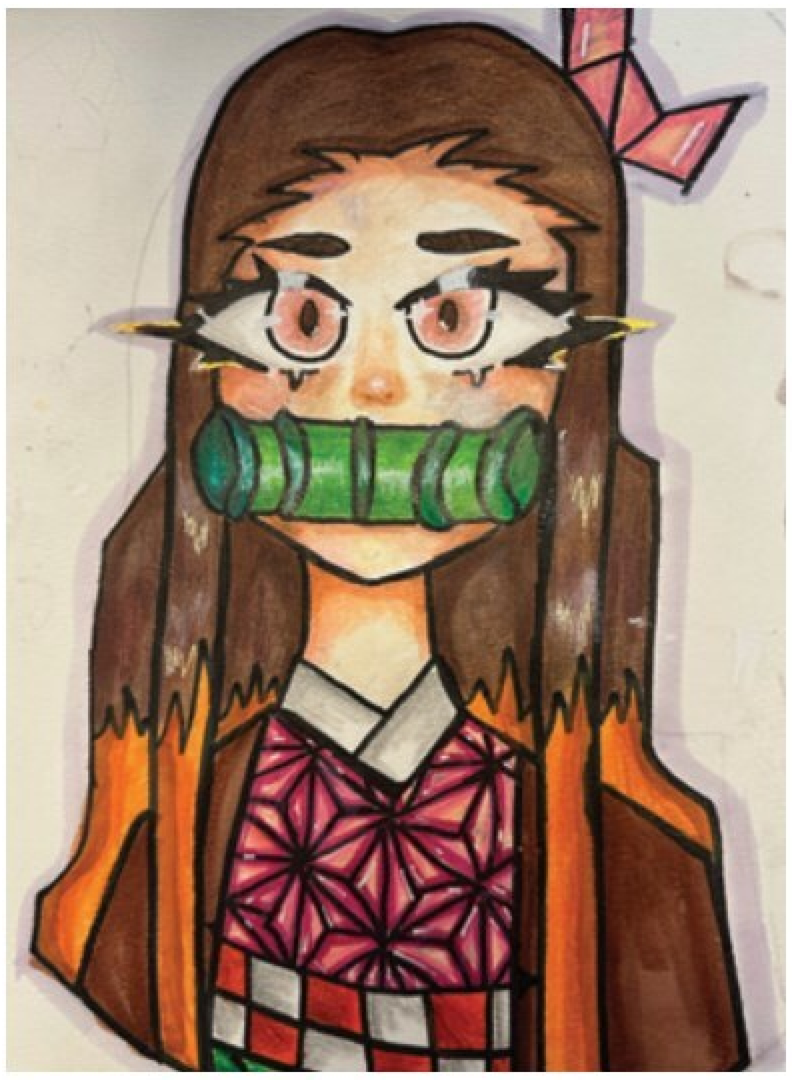
With Prince of Persia going back to its 2D roots for The Lost Crown, and Metroid Dread and Assassin's Creed Mirage also successfully reimagining their familiar series pasts the last couple of years, what are some other series' that need to bring it back to their origins?
– ChainWhippin via Discord

↳ *While the propagation of 3D gaming and open-world design led to several reimaginings of some of gaming's most fabled and beloved franchises, we've started seeing more games that utilize a back-to-basics approach. Titles like Mega Man 11 and Sonic Mania adapted retro-style approaches in novel ways to great effect, but it does seem like more and more developers are experimenting with taking their franchises back to their original forms. Metroid Dread and Assassin's Creed Mirage are great examples of that; though, we can probably thank Metroid: Samus Returns on 3DS for showing that fans still love 2D Metroid games. It's also interesting to view these returns through the lens of the indie scene, as all of the franchises mentioned here are massive, triple-A series, but once they deviated from their original formulas, so many independent developers who grew up playing those games often fill the void. Then, once those prove there's still a market, the trailblazers of the genre often return with an all-original entry that returns to its roots. Look no further than the Metroidvania genre; Konami even lent its Castlevania branding to one of the best indie Metroidvania titles last year in a special Dead Cells expansion.*

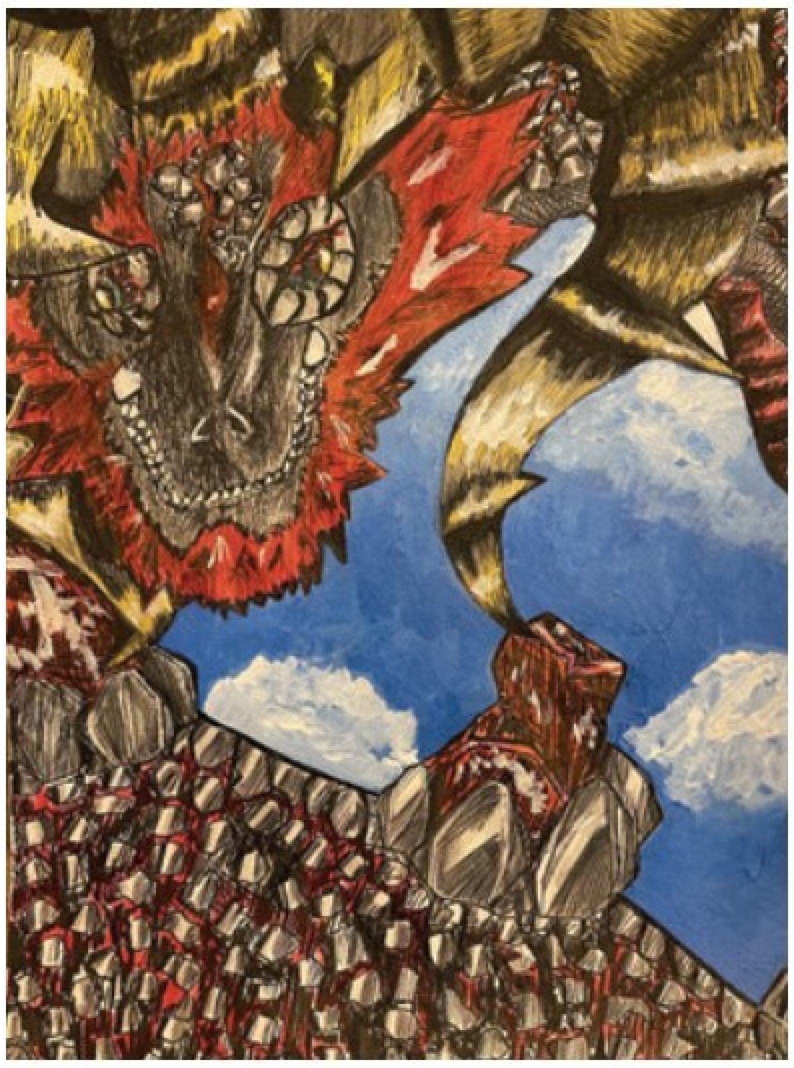
As for game franchises we'd love to see return to their roots, some of the biggest names in gaming immediately come to mind. Series like Final Fantasy and The Legend of Zelda are doing great in their current states, but we can't help but wish for a classic-style entry for each of those series. Thinking outside of the box, now that Activision's been acquired by Xbox, we'd love to see the company dust off some of its dormant franchises in retro forms – we're looking at you, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater and Guitar Hero! And if we're just talking about dormant franchises that need a return in the style of their greatest entries, someone get EA Sports on the phone to talk about NBA Street and SSX!



Reader art winner: Phillip Booth



Reader art submission: Ariadne Salay, age 11



Reader art submission: Máire Cozzi, age 14

1

2

3

4
P3
PERSONA3
RELOAD

5

GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers getting information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the industry.

1.

Marcus visited Sony Interactive Entertainment to get an early hands-on session with The Last of Us Part II Remastered

2.

Game director Ole Tillman and art director Onat Hekimoglu show off the physical puppet its team made of Harold Halibut for its upcoming game, Harold Halibut

3.

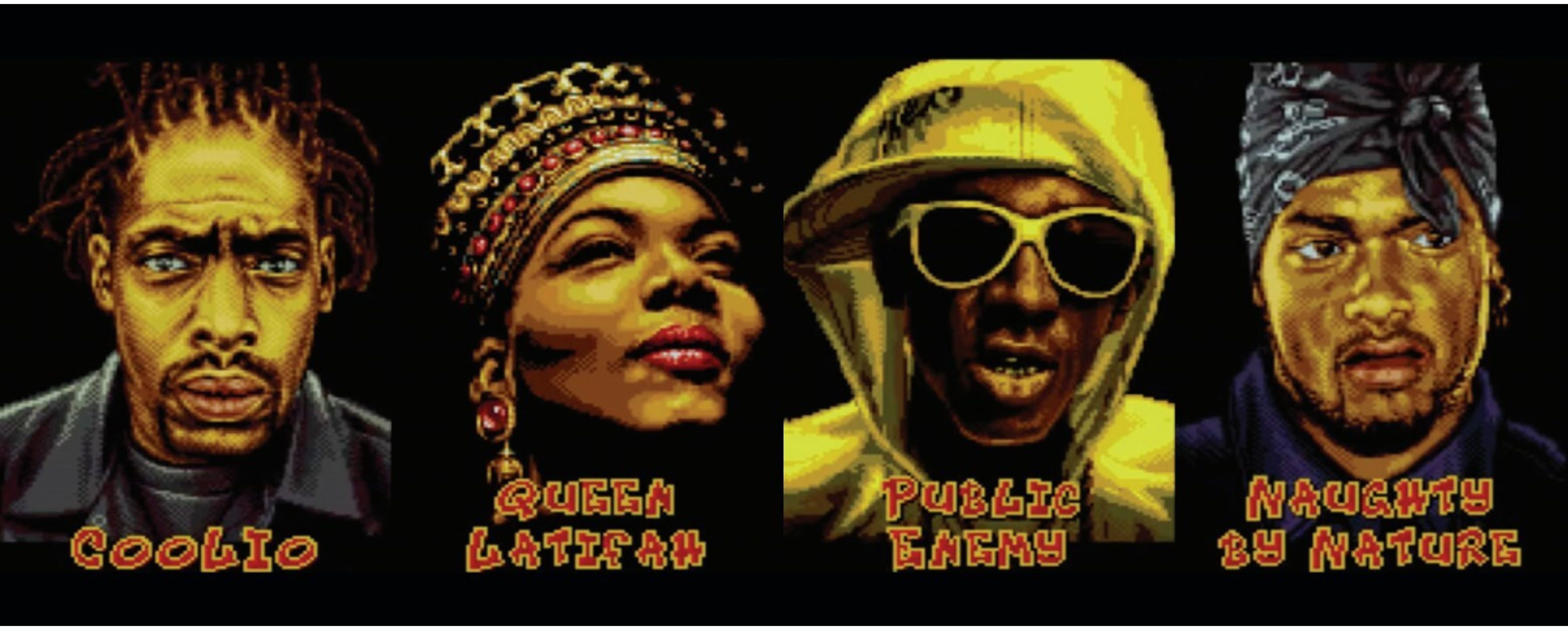
For issue 362's Final Fantasy VII Rebirth cover story, we flew to Tokyo, Japan, to meet with director Naoki Hamaguchi. Go to GameInformer.com/FF7Rebirth for all our exclusive coverage!

4.

We traveled to New York to speak with Persona 3 Reload producer Ryota Niitsuma and director Takuya Yamaguchi

5.

While in Los Angeles, California for The Game Awards, Brian met up with The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom producer Eiji Aonuma and director Hidemaro Fujibayashi. You can read some of what they talked about on p. 24 ■



↓ Rap Jam: Volume One (1995)

Changing the Game

The history and future of hip-hop in games

BY ADE ADENIJI

In December 2023, Epic Games launched the next chapter of Fortnite, one of the most popular games of all time, with a huge virtual performance featuring Eminem, his avatar landing on a stage in front of fans in a far-off world. Who thought hip-hop would take it this far?

As we celebrated the 50th anniversary of hip-hop last year, it's now a good time to look back at how ingrained hip-hop music is in gaming, from NBA2K (remember that 2K13 soundtrack curated by Jay-Z?), Mortal Kombat, and Need for Speed, to Cyberpunk 2077 and, of course, Fortnite.

Mortal Kombat 11 came out of the gates in 2018 with a fiery trailer featuring music by 21 Savage, and later Megan Thee Stallion live-streamed an MK11 match on Twitch. The lore of Grand Theft Auto continues to grow, powered by recent GTA Online updates featuring Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. Time will tell how hip-hop will be used in Grand Theft Auto VI, which at long last stopped playing hard to get and finally gave us a trailer to chew on in December.

But while rappers might have quickly penetrated into the suburbs with their music in the early 1990s, that wasn't going to happen as easily with a Genesis cartridge. One of the earliest hip-hop-infused games, ToeJam & Earl (1991), centers on two alien rappers who have crash-landed on Earth, desperate to return to their home planet. Other games followed, with varied success, including 1996's PaRappa the Rapper. By the early aughts, Def Jam Vendetta, NBA Street, and GTA San Andreas signaled hip hop was here to stay in gaming. Today, while hip-hop is regularly featured in games, we still haven't seen the genre make its way on a large scale to the RPG, strategy, or sci-fi genres.

Game Informer recently spoke with some of the architects and rappers involved with the hip-hop games of the past few decades, including Josh Holmes, co-creator of NBA Street & Def Jam Fight for NY, ToeJam and Earl creator Greg Johnson, rapper Saigon, and former Rockstar leads. How did these game designers go about fashioning games that incorporated hip-hop at a time when the genre was coming of age? How did they get rappers – sometimes legendary ones – to lend their voices, their likenesses, and their stories? Why did some games fall short? We then asked these hip-hop stars and game developers about the future. What role do they see hip-hop playing in gaming in the coming years? What will it take for hip-hop to be the soundtrack for a sci-fi game as much as it is for an NBA2K game? And how do video game developers make sure the culture remains authentic? This is the story of the past, present, and future of hip-hop in games.

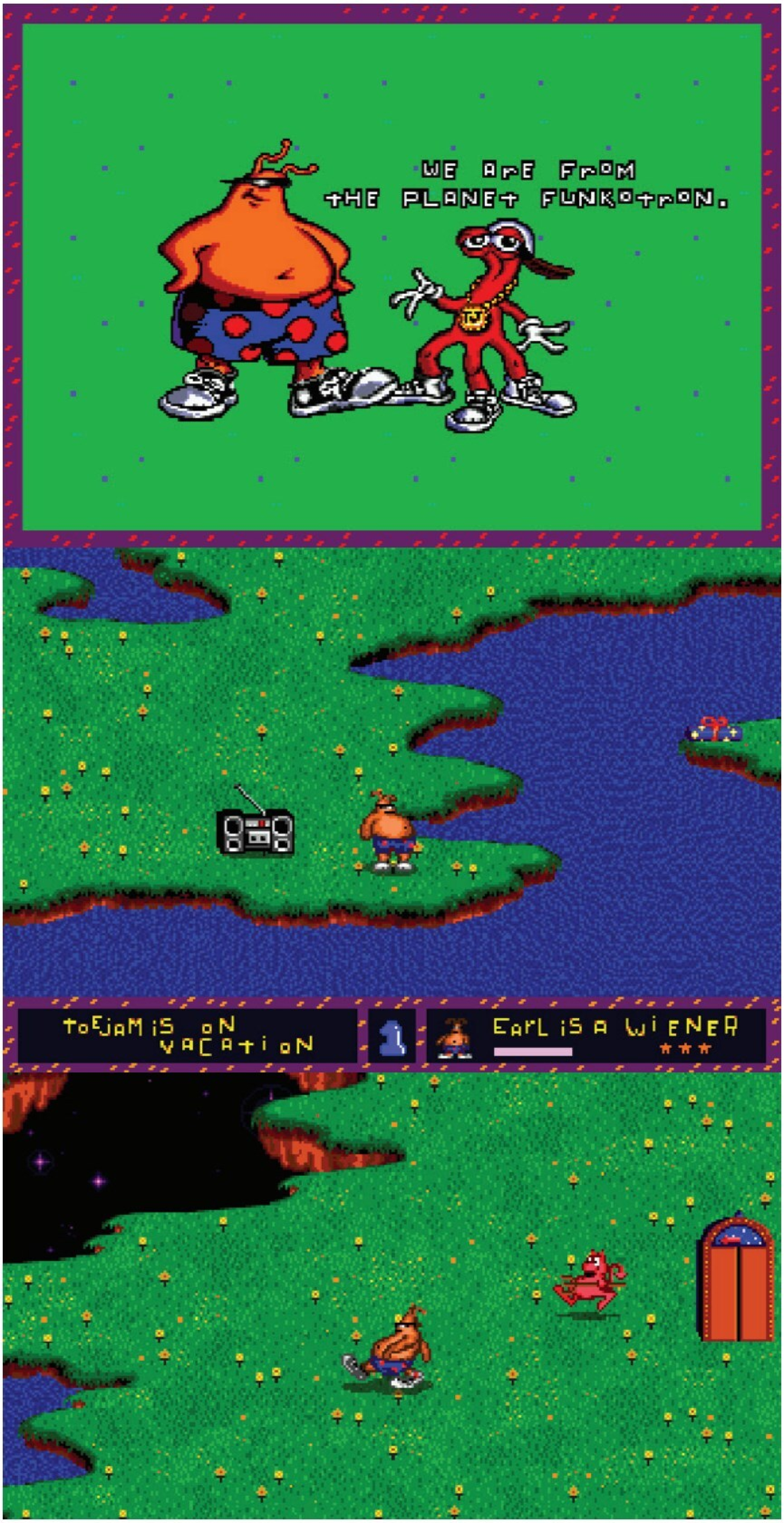
THE EARLY DAYS

Greg Johnson's sleeper hit ToeJam and Earl came out the same year the whiny synths of N.W.A.'s opus *Alwayz Into Somethin'* were unleashed on the world. Born to a white mother and a Black father, Johnson describes going to an ethnically diverse Los

Angeles high school in the mid-1970s and listening to the kind of music that served as a forebear to rap – funk, R&B, and jazz. Specifically, Johnson recalls listening to artists like Stevie Wonder, Parliament, and Herbie Hancock. Johnson initially wanted to get into biolinguistics ("I was going to be the one to talk to the dolphins and the whales"), but in the early 1980s, he tried his hands at games during a time when Tandy, an early computer that could play games, and Space Invaders in bowling alleys were king. "I got really intrigued at the idea of what a game might be. It was wide open. You could do magic," Johnson says.

Johnson says gaming machines couldn't really handle complex music in those days, so putting in great music, including hip-hop, wasn't yet in the cards. But with the Sega Genesis arriving in North America in 1989 and Johnson now consuming the music of rappers like Young MC and Heavy D, he linked up with programmer Mark Voorsanger to start work on ToeJam and Earl. As the story goes, while still working on his first game, Starflight, Johnson, long obsessed with alien life, had a dream about two aliens with hip-hop inclinations.

The offbeat Sega Genesis game definitely leaves an impression. Titular characters ToeJam and Earl, alien teenage rappers from a musical planet dubbed Funkotron, crash land on Earth. In each island world, our two red and orange heroes amble about, avoiding hostile humans while picking up pieces of their ship in the hopes of ditching Earth and getting back to their homeland. "I thought it would be really fun to flip things on its head and do some satire. [ToeJam and Earl are] the sane ones. They're cool and funky. It's the Earthlings who are the crazy ones in this insane world," Johnson says.



WE ARE FROM THE PLANET FUNKOTRON.

ToeJam & Earl (1991)

OTHER EARLY CREATORS

The early days of hip-hop games were a wild west with no enduring franchises and many one-offs. Not all games are remembered as fondly as others, either. 1995's Rap Jam: Volume One for SNES features character models of rappers like Coolio, Yo-Yo, and Warren G facing off in games of street basketball. NBA Street it was not. Besides a barebones hip-hop beat in the menu, the actual in-game action is devoid of music entirely, hip-hop or otherwise. Not even a DJ scratch. Then there's the graphics and perplexing controls.

Pascal Jarry, calling in from Bordeaux, France, is well aware of how his game turned out. But the 20-year industry veteran, who has designed games in three languages and on three continents, was just a young game developer back then.

Jarry and his business partner already had a finished game, which focused on street culture, having come up with friends who were into graffiti and skateboarding in France. But the game needed a distributor. One day in the early 1990s, Jarry says he received a call from someone representing "Motown," offering up the licenses for well-known rappers. Motown Games was a spin-off of the storied Motown Records and had just come off of Bebe's Kids, an ill-fated video game version of the 1992 film by the same name.

Soon, Jarry and his partner landed in the United States to promote the game. During a video game show on the west coast, Jarry recalls running into Coolio and inadvertently leaving him hanging after the rapper gave him a high five. "My friend Marco, the guy doing the art, said, 'Man, you left him hanging!'" Jarry recalls with a laugh. He had half a mind to go back and complete the handshake, but Marco advised him that would be even worse.

Regarding the many critiques of the game, Jarry emphasizes that he definitely wanted to record music and sound from the featured rappers but describes his hands being tied. "At the time, I was just a subcontractor in the corner," Jarry says. "The game was not the best game we have ever made. I like the journey of finishing that game much more than the game itself."

THE BIG LEAGUES

The early aughts were big years for hip-hop video games. The Tony Hawk's Pro Skater series, in addition to punk, also had artists like Nas. And finally, entire video game franchises were being built with hip-hop, including EA's Def Jam Vendetta, which arrived in 2003 with a roster of fighters including Ludacris, Method Man, and DMX.

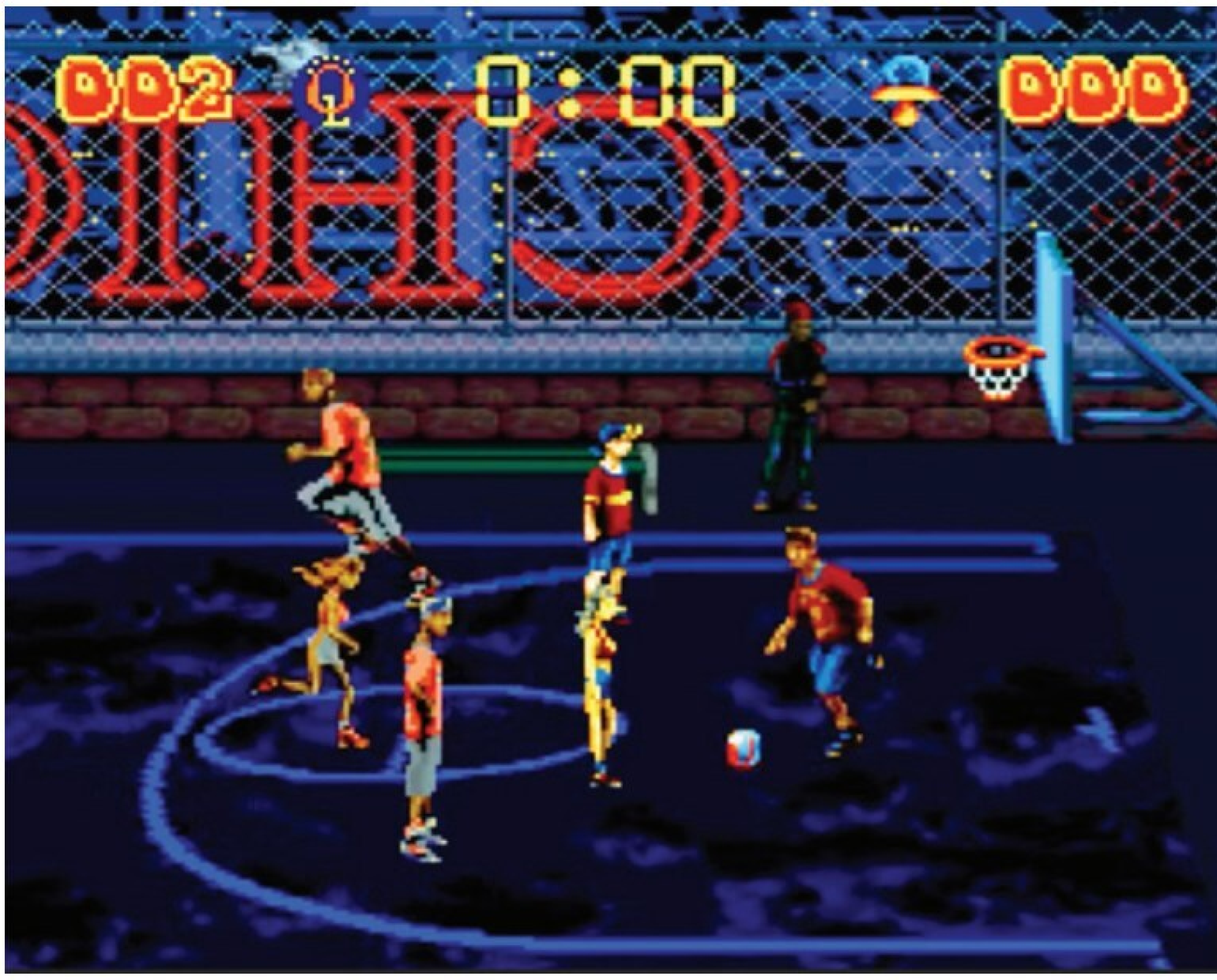
Co-creator Josh Holmes says building the roster of hip-hop legends was a collaborative effort, and his team had a quick turnaround – nine months – to pivot from an intergalactic wrestling game to what became Def Jam Vendetta. Holmes personally met with each rapper to pitch them on the game and outline their role.

The initial game did not have all the artists the team originally wanted. Some were on tour, while others weren't sold on the project. But with sequels Def Jam: Fight for NY and Def Jam: Icon, Holmes says rappers really started to trust the franchise's intentions. "To this day, I continue to receive messages from fans who express how much these games meant to them and how they wish for another sequel," Holmes says.

Mark Jordan, a.k.a. DJ Pooh, in addition to being a legendary LA-area hip-hop beatmaker for songs like Ice Cube's "Today Was a Good Day," joined the Grand Theft Auto franchise as a writer for San Andreas and later provided the cosign that convinced Dr. Dre to feature in GTA Online. Pooh brought a lot of other hip-hop talent to Rockstar, including Julio G (née Julio Gonzalez), the veteran voice of 93.5 KDAY radio in Los Angeles, who has worked with the likes of Eazy-E and Snoop Dogg. Julio G ended up also being the voice of Radio

LESSON 1
U rappin' GOOD !
COOL
GOOD
BAD
AWFUL
SCORE 0
nevertheless you'll get
a less

CHOP
CHOP
SCORE 22
COOL
GOOD
BAD
U rappin' AWFUL !
Punch Punch Punch



↙
Left to right:
PaRappa the Rapper (1996), Rap Jam: Volume One (1995), NBA Street (2001), Def Jam Vendetta (2003)

Los Santos, the in-game radio station that plays the same West Coast '90s hip-hop that Julio G helped beam across SoCal.

"Myself and DJ Pooh, we've known each other since the '80s," Julio G tells *Game Informer*. He clarifies that he's not even a gamer, but that one day in 2003, he received a call from Pooh asking him to come down to talk about this new video game he was putting together. Julio G agreed without a second thought – and without fully understanding that he was about to be in one of the biggest games ever.

At a Los Angeles studio, Pooh asked Julio G to read from a script. Some Rockstar staff were also present. It was in this setting that Julio G delivered hilarious lines like "We got a shout out from Denise in Ganton for her man. Give her a call, man!" a reference to one of CJ's girlfriends. And later, when a riot erupts all across Los Santos, Julio G gets on the airwaves to urge calm. He recorded his segments in about two to three hours, with 90 to 95% of those coming on the first take, he says. "I'm just reading and flipping it my way."

While every other DJ on the game goes by an alias, Julio G says Pooh insisted that Rockstar use the radio veteran's real name because he wanted it to be authentic to LA and the legacy of West Coast rap.

As far as the range of tracks on Radio Los Santos, including Chicano rapper Frost's "La Raza," Julio G clarifies that that was "all DJ Pooh." Julio G says he didn't even hear the full recording of all of his work until someone showed him a compilation of his segments on YouTube last year.

He also had some surprising things to say about Eazy-E, who, in addition to being a gangsta rap pioneer, was also working on a video game concept before dying of HIV in 1995. The idea is something Julio G says Eazy would talk a lot about with him. "The whole concept of [his] game was getting your lowrider to a supershow, and in the process, you had to go rob somebody... go hydraulic hopping against this dude in a different neighborhood. It was like a Grand Theft Auto in its own way. He was working on it when he passed in '95. He was working on it all through '94," Julio G says.

↓
Grand Theft Auto:
San Andreas
(2004)

↙
Snoop Dogg as
Crow in Def Jam:
Fight for NY (2004)

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ROCKSTAR'S HIP HOP NERDS

Several Rockstar brass also had a passion for hip-hop and took the task of weaving the genre into their games very seriously. One of Rockstar co-founder Sam Houser's idols is Rick Rubin, the founder of Def Jam Recordings. Another is Greg Johnson, longtime Rockstar Games senior researcher, not to be confused with the ToeJam game developer. This Greg Johnson, now at Lightspeed LA, is a veteran hip-hop journalist for publications like *Spin*, *Complex*, and *XXL*. In the early 2000s, Johnson's editor friend told him about a new opportunity at Rockstar Games, which wanted to build out a dedicated research team to gear up for the development of San Andreas. "Especially for that game, having a potential hip-hop journalist that could make the leap to game design was one thing that they were strongly considering," Johnson says. Rockstar and Johnson quickly connected during a series of interviews, and he was soon reporting directly to Rockstar co-founder Dan Houser on the job.

Adam Tedman, former Rockstar vice president of new media and global head of digital marketing, who now works at Dan Houser's new Absurd Ventures, was particularly keen to talk about Rockstar's use of hip-hop in The Warriors, its 2005 beat 'em up adapting the 1979 movie of the same name, and in Grand Theft Auto IV. Tedman helped bring producer Statik Selektah to GTA IV's expansions, where Selektah produced tracks for Talib Kweli and Freeway. Selektah tells *Game Informer* he met Tedman in 2008 right after GTA IV dropped. "They asked me to come out and produce a couple of records and do the radio station and all that. It was like a dream come true," Selektah says.

Sometimes when hip-hop comes together to create music for games, there are unintended consequences. Rapper Saigon, maybe best known for his recurring role in HBO's *Entourage* Season 2, says that when he went over to record "Spit" at Selektah's house specifically for GTA, the two ended up with an entire album, *All in a Days' Work*. "If I didn't go there to do that song, that album never gets made," Saigon said.

As a rapper early to moving between television, music, and video games, Saigon is impressed with the current generation of rappers, who are taking things to a whole new level. "They're making songs solely for Rockstar Games and NBA2K and all those big games," Saigon says. "It feels good to know I had some kind of influence to the generation who went on to become the most successful generation of the culture ever."

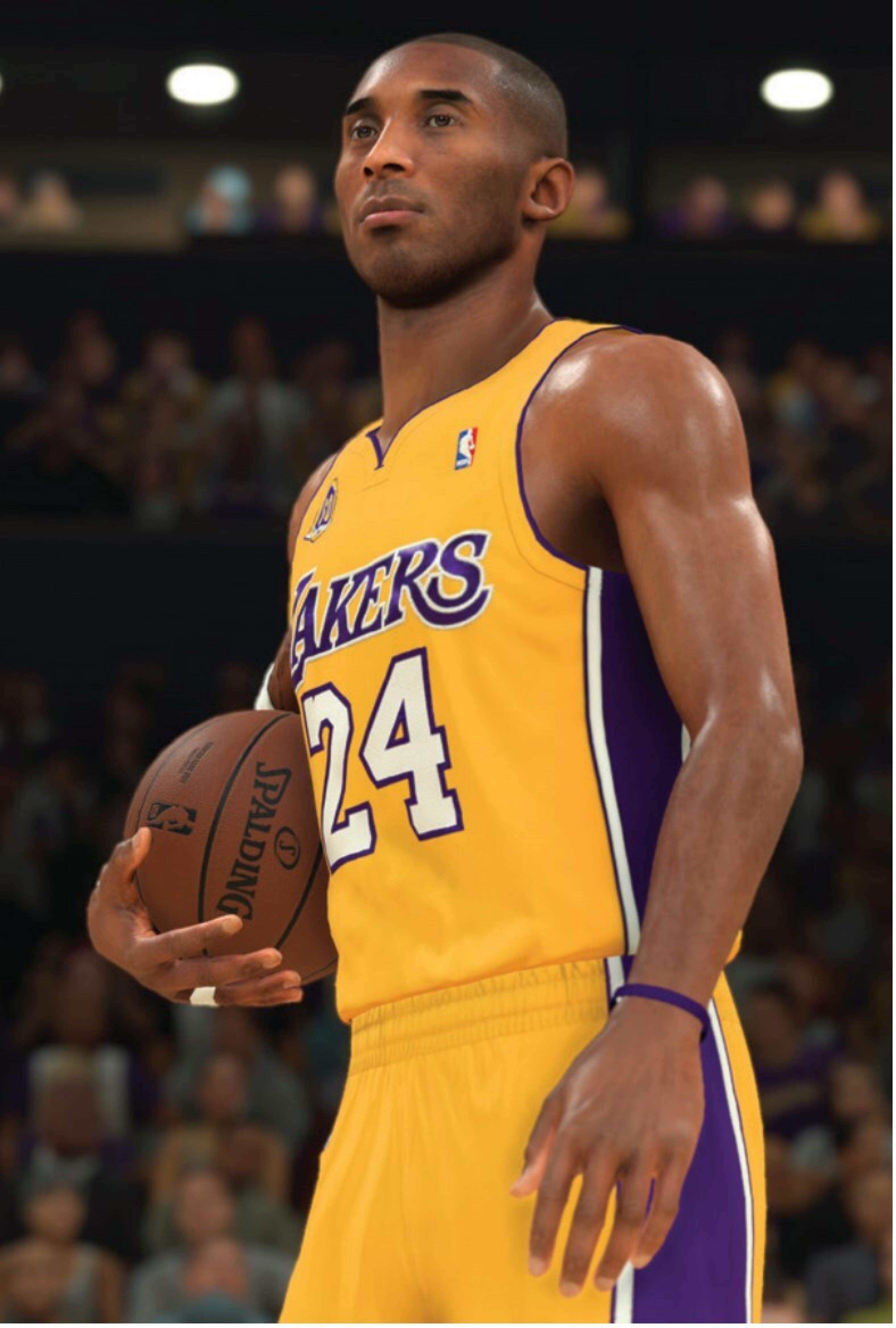
THE FUTURE OF HIP-HOP AND GAMING

Several of the hip-hop stars who spoke to *Game Informer* are serious gamers. Saigon has been playing games for decades ("I was the one who learned how to warp [on Mario]"). Selektah speaks about unwinding with Call of Duty and GTA as a single father after his daughter goes to bed.

These days, Johnson thinks the gaming industry is starting to recognize the sheer creative talent in the hip-hop world. "When you get to know them, you find a whole bunch of comic book fans, you find anime nerds, a whole bunch of dudes who used to compete to see who could draw comic book heroes better in the third grade, you know?" Johnson says.

For sports games, it's almost inevitable that hip-hop found itself there because the music made a huge impact on several generations of NBA and NFL athletes. But now the question isn't just about artists appearing in a game as a one-off but about actually having true equity from a business standpoint. He mentions musician Raphael Saddiq, a cofounder of independent game publisher IllFonic. Johnson expects more stars to think more about the business side of video games down the line.

He's unsure exactly how hip-hop will be used next and if games will use hip-hop more heavily in sci-fi and other genres. But he calls rap "outlaw" music and thinks it can serve as the sound of many different stories and worlds. This is something game developers should keep in mind. "Whether you're sampling or replaying, that's a very hip-hop mentality and sensibility. If you're interested in representing any outlaw vibe, any rebel culture, it could be rastas, it could be bikers, it could be smugglers, hip-hop is always a good soundtrack for that." ■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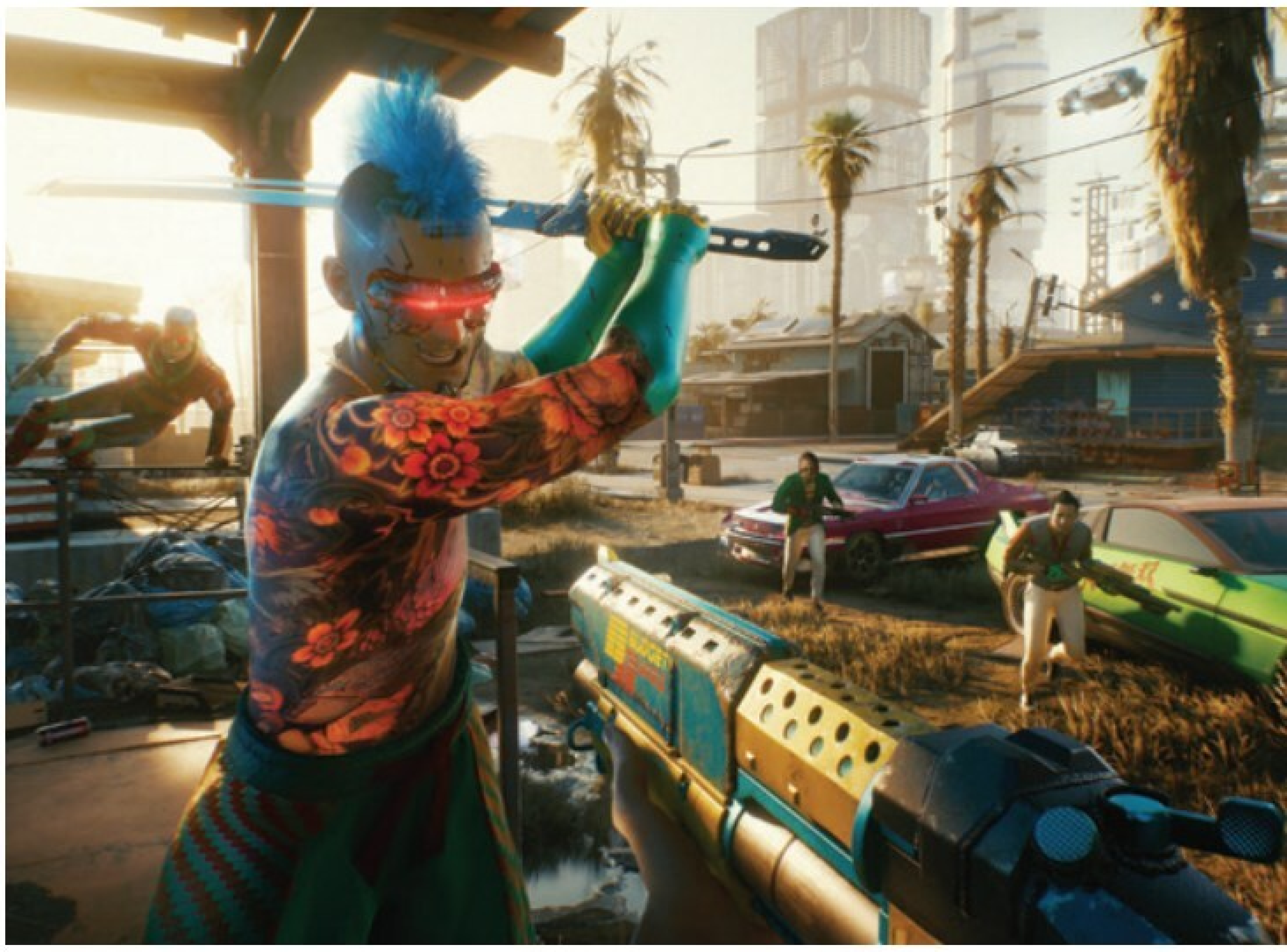

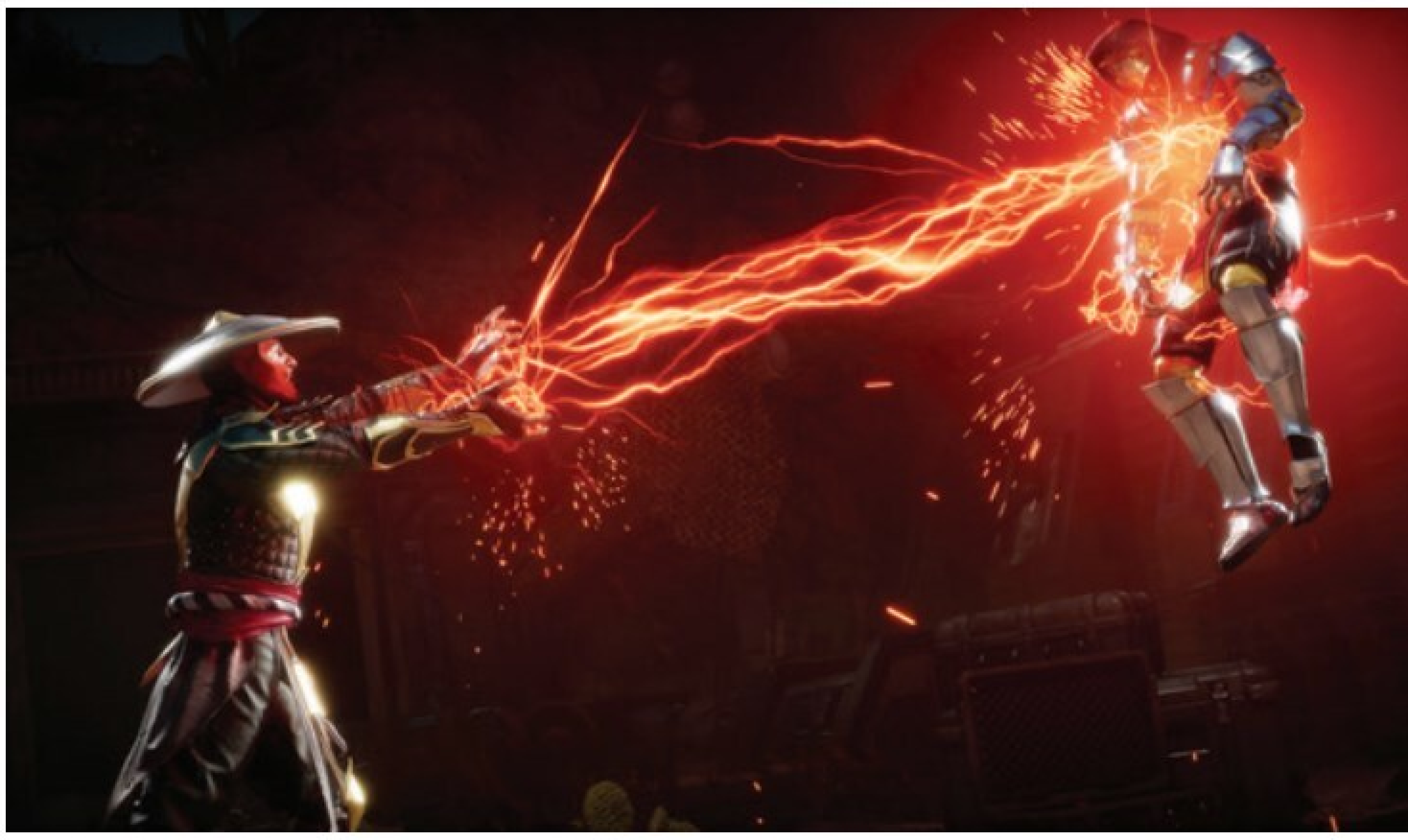

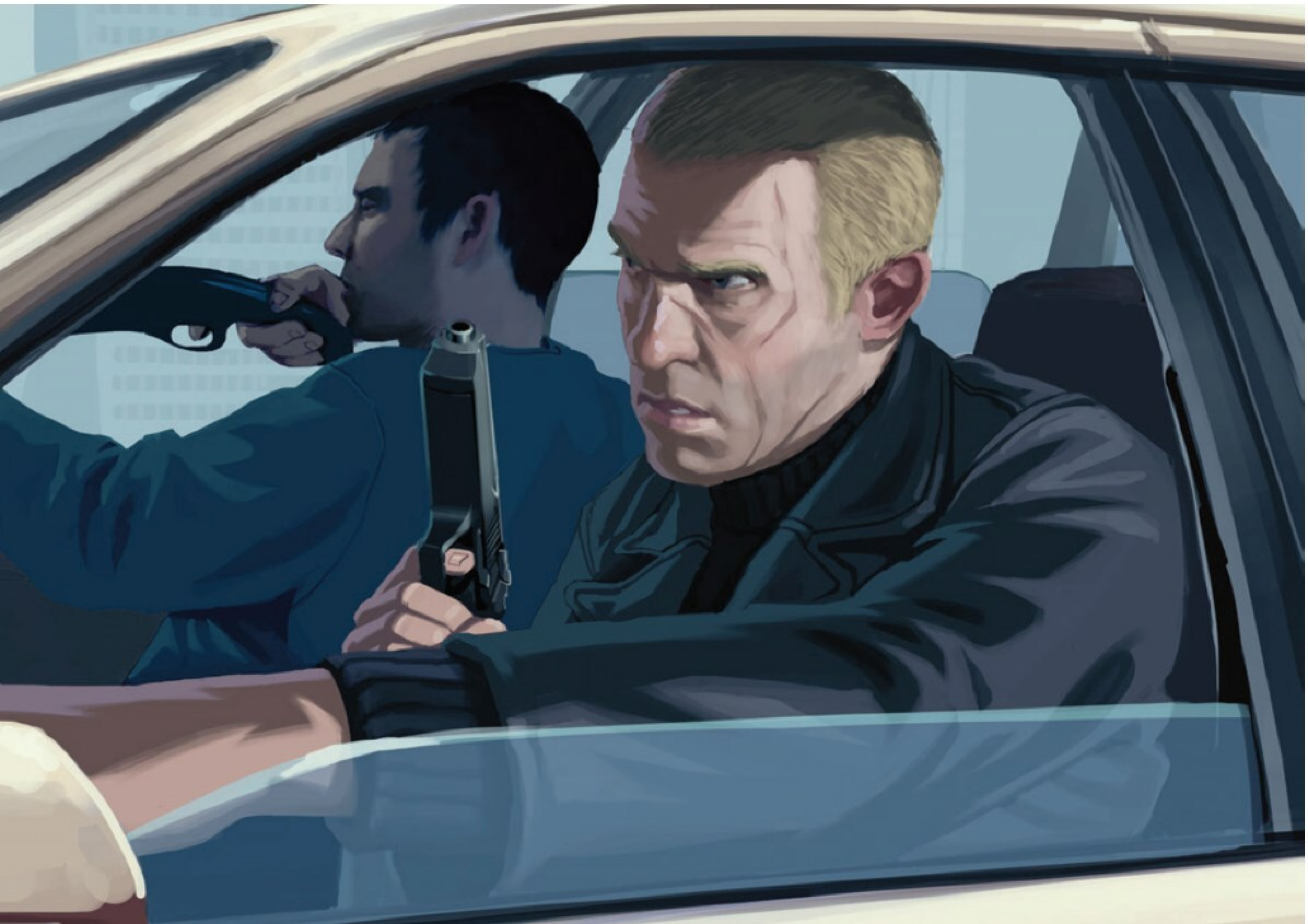

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Clockwise: Eminem in Fortnite (2023), Kobe Bryant in NBA 2K24 (2023), Cyberpunk 2077 (2020), Mortal Kombat 11 (2019), Grand Theft Auto IV (2008)

LEAVING THE VAULT

The stars of Amazon's *Fallout* share how they're bringing Bethesda's Wasteland to live-action

BY BRIAN SHEA

THE TAGLINE OF THE FALLOUT FRANCHISE MAY BE "WAR NEVER CHANGES," but the landscape of video game adaptations sure has. Once considered a laughingstock of Hollywood, video game adaptations have experienced a renaissance in recent years, thanks to high-quality, high-grossing, and critically acclaimed films like *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* and series like *The Last of Us.* The next major game adaptation, *Fallout*, hopes to join the upward trend this category of movies and television has experienced.

Announced in 2020 for Amazon's Prime Video streaming service, *Fallout* tells a distinct story within the post-apocalyptic Wasteland with a familiar backdrop from the various games in the series. Following a nuclear war, survivors retreated to Vaults to wait out the havoc and destruction of the bombs. Approximately 200 years later, a young Vault Dweller named Lucy emerges into a devastated Los Angeles.

For actress Ella Purnell, who stars as Lucy, watching playthroughs of the games was instrumental for understanding the tone of the world, but since Lucy is a unique character created for the show, she relied on other aspects to arrive at her performance.

"When I want to get into the psychology behind what happens when you've lived underground your entire life, and then you come out to the surface, it's a different kind of mindset," she says. "I wanted to come up with it on my own."

Bethesda's Todd Howard executive produced and worked with the cast and crew on set, but actor Walton Goggins, who plays a mutated bounty hunter known as The Ghoul, also credits the writing team for perfectly balancing the drama and comedy of the Fallout world. "It was all on the page," Goggins says. "They did their homework, and it was built into the DNA of the story that they created. This isn't Fallout 1, 2, or 3; it's its own thing. It's original content within the Fallout world."

Jonathan Nolan, who wrote on acclaimed films such as *Memento*, *The Prestige*, *The Dark Knight*, and *Interstellar* alongside his brother Christopher, co-created the science-fiction HBO series *Westworld* with *Burn Notice* writer Lisa Joy. The duo of Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy developed *Fallout* for Amazon as co-writers and executive producers, with Jonathan Nolan also serving as director.

Each of the three main characters approaches the world from a different perspective; Lucy is the naïve Vault Dweller stepping outside her underground home for the first time in her life, while The Ghoul is a gunslinger who has survived in the Wasteland longer than Lucy has been alive. Meanwhile, Maximus, played by actor Aaron Moten, is a member of the Brotherhood of Steel faction, ensuring he also has a different worldview from the other two main characters.

"I think the character creator is where that idea comes from," Moten says. "[Nolan] has been talking a lot about how he's the type of player that spends eight hours in the creator before he can even launch into the game. It's nice to have such different perspectives, you know?"

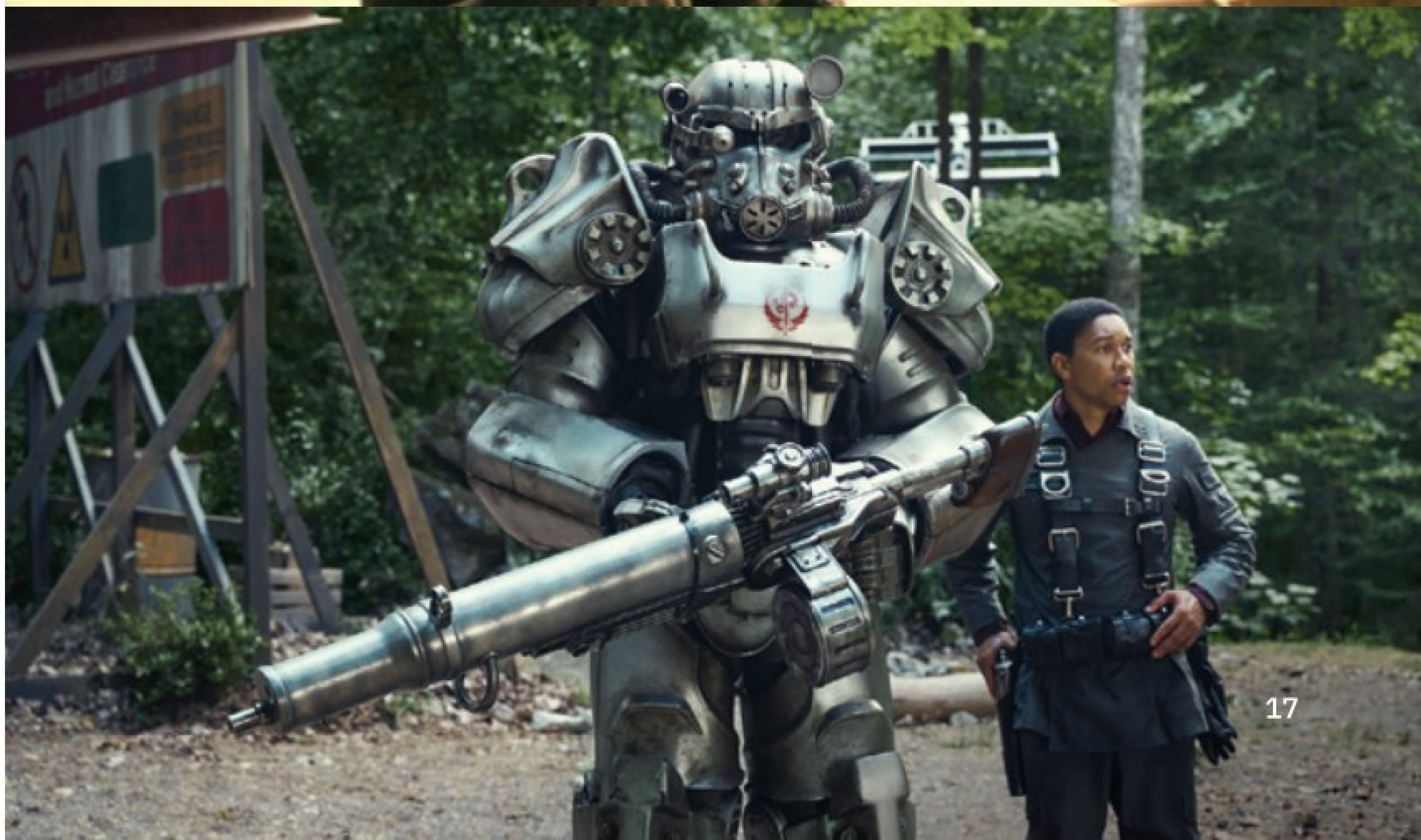
With *Fallout* showing promise and holding an excellent pedigree of talent behind it, video game adaptations continue to show that they can and should be taken seriously. The stigma that a video game movie or show – particularly a live-action one – is doomed to be bad is finally falling to the wayside.

But it goes beyond the pedigree. After all, several poorly received films and series have had excellent writing teams, directors, producers, and casts. In talking to the actors, what attracted them to the project was the opportunity to tell stories within this rich and expansive world that so many players are already familiar with while combining that aspect with real-world themes many of us experienced around the same time *Fallout* was announced in summer 2020.

"The interesting thing is even with the things that we've gone through as a global community with COVID and how things drastically changed for all of us, but our own human, subversive sides are still there," Moten says. "We found a way to connect with each other. Something that's akin to Fallout is factions. That's humanity trying to restart itself again, and there are just these differing positions on it."

Goggins posits that the recent upward trajectory of game adaptations could be a symptom of it being newer than other genres. "You follow good storytelling no matter where it is, and games that are being adapted into movies and TV shows right now are that way for a reason; that's where the great stories are, and *Fallout* is a great story," he says. "I think that with any new genre, there's a learning curve. What do the fans expect? What licenses can you take outside of the game? And when do you stay in the game? I think that people were earnestly trying to do that. [...] I think it's just like, 'That didn't work in that one' or 'That didn't work in that one,' and they're fine-tuning and fine-tuning, and everybody is looking at what everybody else did. And now we're just in a really sweet spot with some really great stories that deserve to be told with great people telling them."

We'll soon learn if this is one of those great stories that will become another poster child for video game adaptations as *Fallout* arrives on Amazon Prime Video on April 12. ■



Modernized Nostalgia

How developers are recapturing the magic of beloved RPGs from yesteryear through modern remakes

BY BRIAN SHEA

Every RPG faithful has that formative experience that turned them into a lifelong fan. But what if you could experience it again for the first time? Or if you could recommend it to those who haven't played it without needing to explain away the parts that haven't aged well? In today's gaming landscape, remasters are common, but we've seen an influx of full-on remakes of classic role-playing games in recent years.

While 1990's Ys I & II is likely the earliest example of remade role-playing games, perhaps the most prominent early examples came in the form of the Pokémon franchise. Pokémon FireRed and LeafGreen, 2004 remakes of the series' debut titles less than a decade after their initial release, showcased the technological leap from original Game Boy to Game Boy Advance. However, when those games were remade for a second time through Pokémon Let's Go, Pikachu & Let's Go, Eevee on Switch in 2018, it was an even bigger jump ahead.

Despite their mixed reception, the Switch versions served a specific purpose for Game Freak, who had developed its mainline Pokémon titles exclusively for handheld platforms to that point. "The plan from the beginning was to use Let's Go, Pikachu & Let's Go, Eevee as our pilot projects on Nintendo Switch to research how to develop the game, like researching how to render the 3D graphics and do all the different event cutscenes within the Nintendo Switch hardware," Pokémon director Shigeru Ohmori told us in 2019. "The Let's Go, Pikachu and the Sword & Shield teams were working together from the beginning to really build that base knowledge."

But those remakes of Pokémon Red, Blue, and Yellow did something else beyond allowing Game Freak to ease into the development for a new platform through a familiar template: They made the first-generation Pokémon adventure available on a modern platform in some form. In talking with various developers who have worked on RPG remakes, making games available for a new generation serves as a primary motivation for them.

"Some of the titles that are considered classics are rather difficult to obtain and play in the modern gaming landscape, so seeing those titles getting high-quality remakes and having the experience passed down to a newer generation of players is something that should be welcomed by both creators and players," Star Ocean: The Second Story R producer Kei Komaki says.

But even in an age where so many classic titles are re-released digitally, sometimes that isn't enough to open the door to new players. In the case of the Persona series, 2023 welcomed Persona 3 Portable and Persona 4 Golden to current platforms.

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Persona 3 Reload (2024)

While the 2012 update to Persona 4 still feels modern enough, many felt Persona 3 Portable – a 2010 PSP release of the 2006 PS2 game – didn't feel up to today's standards.

The result led to intensified calls from the fan base for a request that had already been prominent within the Persona community: a modern remake of Persona 3. Fan demand often plays a major role in pushing development teams to focus on a remake. For the Persona team at Atlus, it was the primary motivating factor when development started.

"We had a lot of input from our fans and from players of our games and it seemed like everybody really wanted to see a remake of Persona 3," Persona 3 Reload producer Ryota Niitsuma says. "Once we finished Persona 5 Royal, internally, we were ready for another title, and we were trying to figure out what it was, and it just seemed like the right moment. It seemed like all the stars had aligned."

The community requests for a Persona 3 remake were focused and consistent, but fan demand was perhaps never higher for an RPG remake than in the lead up to the 2015 announcement of Final Fantasy VII Remake. It had become so overwhelming and persistent on social media that multiple members of the media brought it up with series producer Yoshinori Kitase during the team's U.S. media tour for Final Fantasy XIII in 2009.

"We just got a ton of questions from reporters asking when we are going to make the Final Fantasy VII remake," Kitase recalls. "Just hearing that so many times, I did think we would do it one day, that's for certain. [...] People had really approached us as if remaking VII was just a given. We had so much of that sentiment."

Many remakes don't have the luxury of involving the original developers in the creation of these new versions. But thanks to Square Enix's long-tenured staff, the likes of Kitase, Kazushige Nojima, Motomu Toriyama, and Tetsuya Nomura – all of whom served crucial roles in the development of the original Final Fantasy VII – were still with the company and enthusiastic about being involved in a remake.

"Within Square Enix, gradually, remakes were being made, and these ideas for remakes were coming up in other departments, so if we weren't going to do Final Fantasy VII, others were going to do it, so we had to rise up and do it!" Nomura says. "We had the sense that we really had to guard Final Fantasy VII and we have to be the ones taking this on or someone else was going to do it. I thought it may be a bit troublesome if other teams without us took on this project."

The team on Final Fantasy VII Remake and Rebirth is also composed of those who didn't work on the original game, but grew up playing it as fans,

Left: Persona 3 Reload (2024); Right: Persona 3 (2006)
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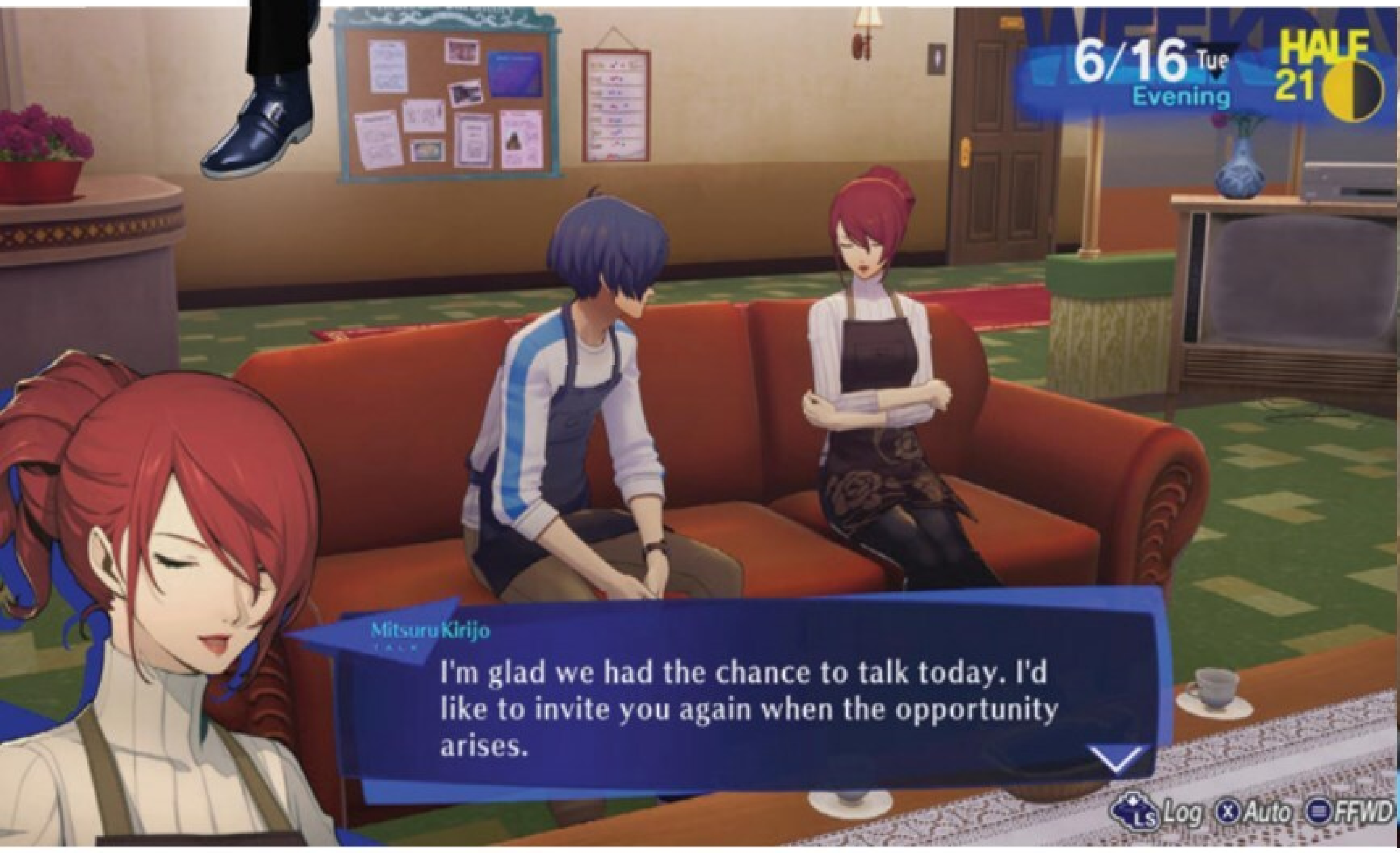
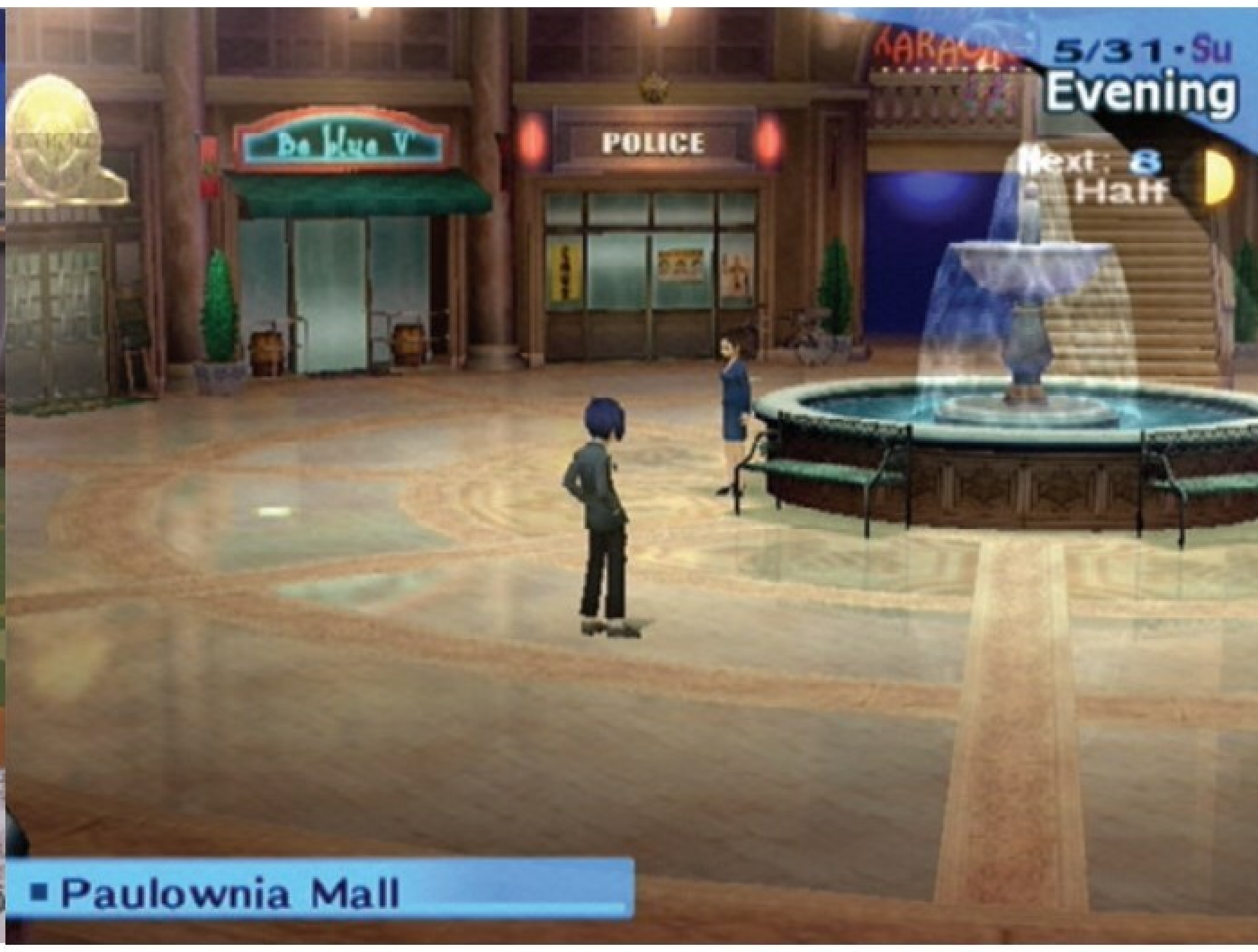


Mitsuru Kirijo

I'm glad we had the chance to talk today. I'd like to invite you again when the opportunity arises.



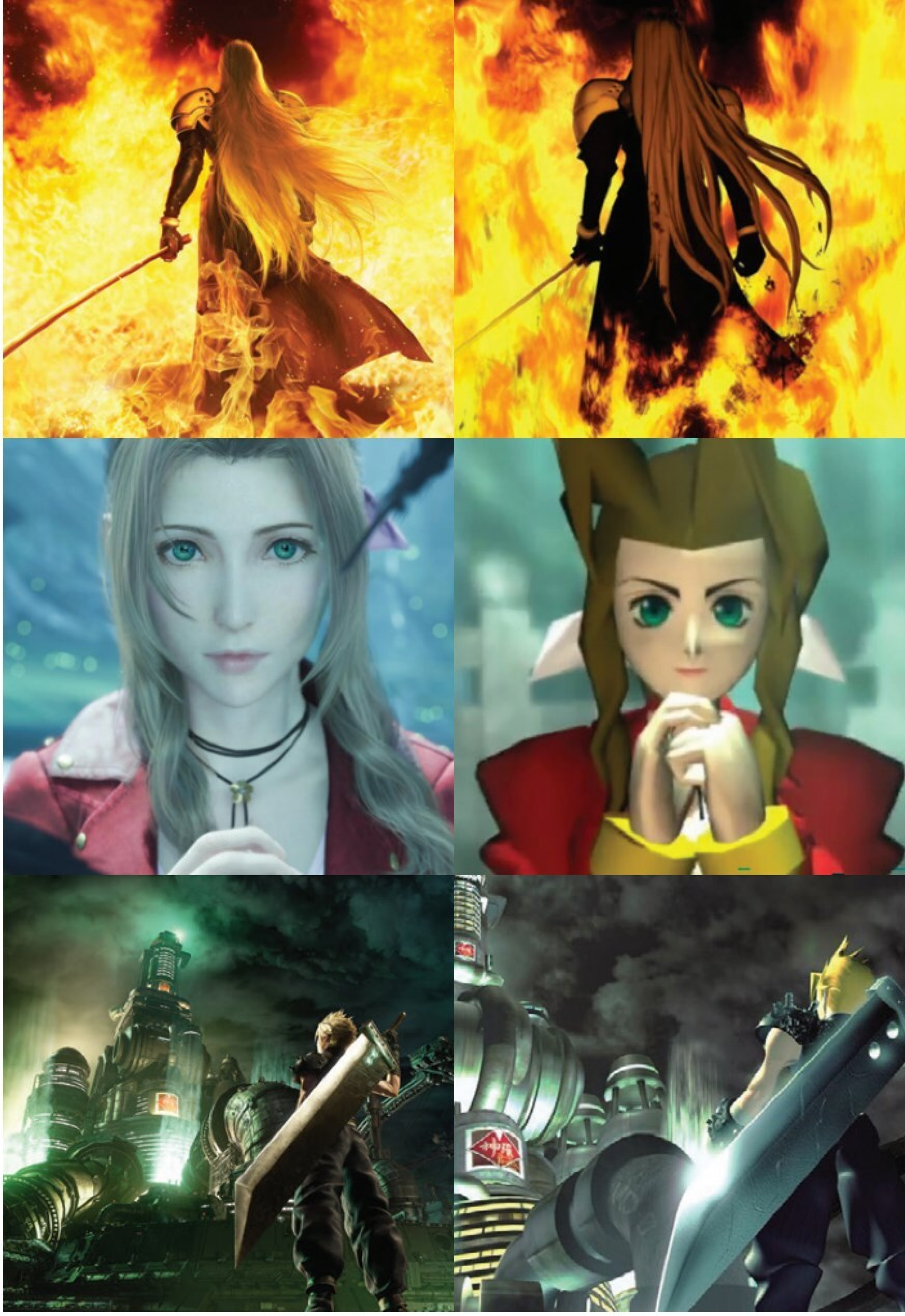
including director Naoki Hamaguchi. "I would say the majority of the dev staff and production members for Rebirth are those who were players of the original, not creators," Toriyama says. "I think that the members of the Rebirth development team that were players or fans of the original wish to kind of protect and stay true to the original as much as possible."

In fact, that seems to be an important task for all development teams working on remakes, as they attempt to balance appealing to the purists who grew up playing the game and the new generation who maybe wasn't even born when the original launched. Those prove to be difficult conversations at the start of the project, as the teams balance old with new.

"I believe that there are two critical elements to consider," Komaki says. "The first is to ensure that you're making the game for the fans that have supported the title thus far, and the second is to take the nostalgia and experiences held dearly by the fans and turn them into something engaging for the newer players, as a modern game."

Despite similar debates and conclusions happening at all the studios, the teams ended up at very different places. For the Star Ocean team, they created a pixel-based art style like that of the original game, but with HD elements and added effects. Meanwhile, the Persona developers opted for a more one-to-one approach, but in the style of its most recent game, Persona 5, complete with various modern amenities afforded by that format.

"There were a lot of people with a lot of different opinions." Persona 3 Reload director Takuya Yamaguchi says. "After a lot of discussion, we decided to mainly go with a one-to-one approach to recreate the original game. [...] It's a new, modern game that has all the trappings that you would expect."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Left: Final Fantasy VII Remake (2020); Right: Final Fantasy VII (1997)

The Final Fantasy VII Remake team made the most sweeping changes, blowing out the story and gameplay experience to create a massive, modern trilogy out of the original game. Not only that, but everything was rebuilt from the ground up, including the visuals, world, characters, and battle system.

That last point was perhaps the biggest undertaking for the Final Fantasy VII Remake team, and the one most indicative of why remakes are such a hot commodity in today's gaming landscape: they can adapt to modern trends to appeal to new audiences.

"I do believe that not just for RPGs, but for other fantasy-type titles as well, the trend will be such that it'll be moving towards incorporating more action elements and that will be the trajectory of games overall," Hamaguchi says. "There's this immediacy that brings about further immersion into the gameplay. Instead of viewing this fantasy world from the outside perspective as a player, to be fully immersed as if you are inside that world. That truly resonates with these players."

Though the remakes mean different things for different developers, the trend seems here to stay. Star Ocean: The Second Story R and Super Mario RPG received high praise in 2023, and Persona 3 Reload and Final Fantasy VII Rebirth are among the most anticipated releases of the first quarter of 2024. Not only that, but remakes of classic games like The Witcher, Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, and Dragon Quest III are announced for future release, meaning there are no signs of this trend slowing down.

And while there will always be those who bemoan so many developers working on remakes instead of all-new experiences, there's no denying the power of making some of the greatest video games of all time approachable for a new generation of players. ■

KING OF THE GREEN HILL

The life and career of Sonic Team creative officer Takashi Iizuka

BY BRIAN SHEA

TAKASHI IIZUKA GREW UP HAVING NO IDEA that he would work in video games, let alone go on to helm one of the biggest franchises in the industry. An avid reader of Japanese visual novels, Iizuka grew up loving series like *Ashita no Joe* and dreaming of being a manga artist.

Enamored by the idea of bringing the stories, characters, and worlds in his imagination to life through art, Iizuka looked for a way to pursue that career path, but when no university offered studies in that area, he went to a more traditional school. While at Tokyo Denki University, Iizuka realized another career path might be more attainable while still offering him the creative outlet he craved.

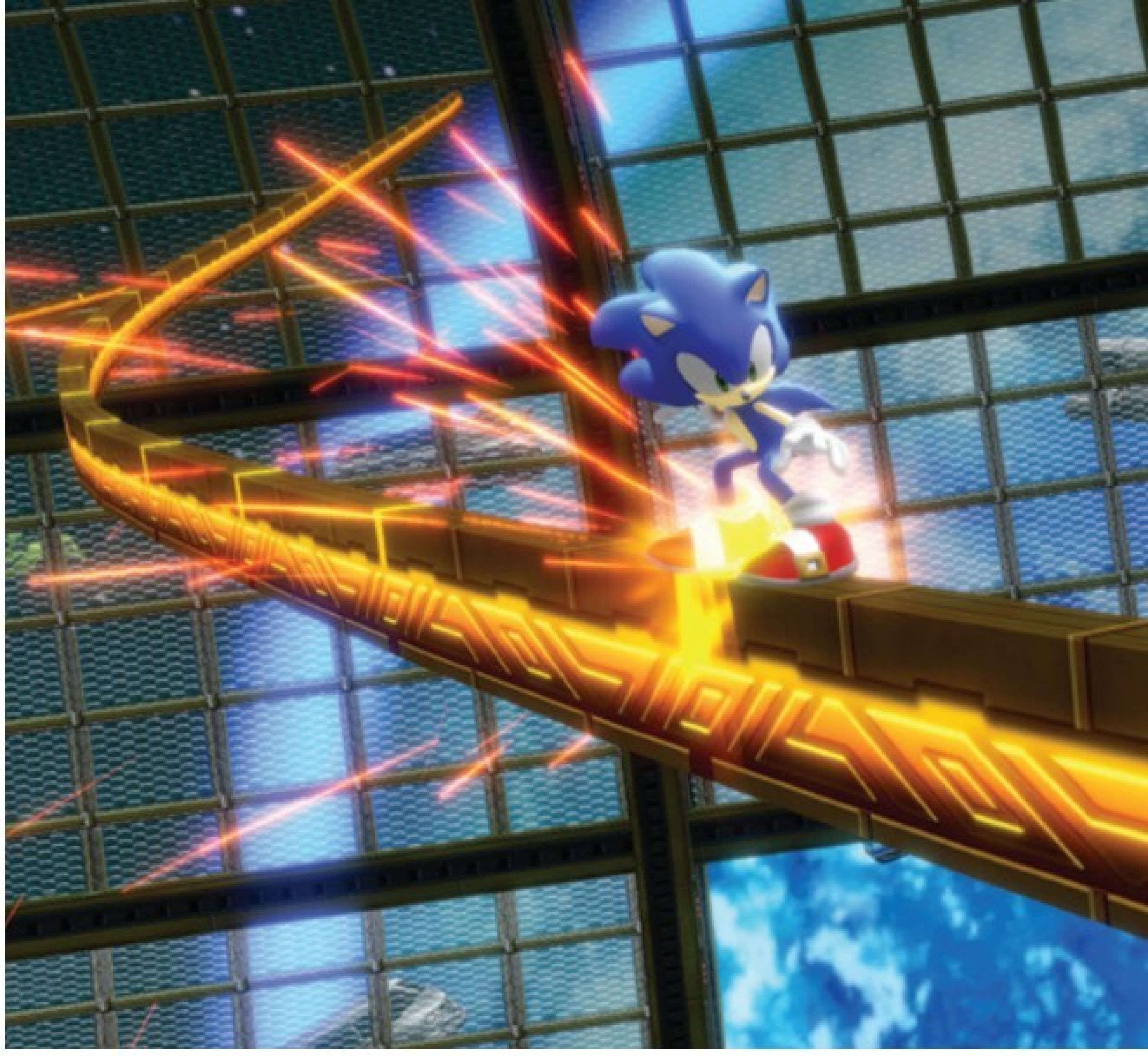
In elementary school, Iizuka loved arcade titles like Pac-Man and Space Invaders, but the release of the Nintendo Famicom in 1983 took his love of the medium to the next level. He bought it nearly the day it was released and spent his afternoons lost in the worlds of Nintendo's console. However, because it was a new form of entertainment, he never considered it a viable career path until he got to school.

"At that time, the new media, video games, was becoming something that I could participate in from a job perspective," he says. "When I started looking into it, it had all the elements that I liked about taking all the things from my imagination, imagining all these characters and worlds and stories, and turning that into a real product."

Iizuka's epiphany that game design could be a more attainable creative outlet than his initial dream led to him enrolling in various courses focused on programming, graphics, and management. As graduation neared, Iizuka began looking for video game companies to work for. He didn't want to leave Tokyo, so Kyoto-based Nintendo was out, leaving his preferred options as Sega, Namco, and Konami.

Before beginning the application process, Iizuka bought a Mega Drive to familiarize himself with Sega's games. At the time, Sonic the Hedgehog was the popular title, so he picked up a copy and loved it.

Thanks to his studies, Iizuka was able to line up a job at Sega before he graduated in 1992. For the first eight months of his time at Sega, he bounced around the company, assisting with different projects. Iizuka worked on enemy design for Golden Axe III and developed a game called Devi & Pii with another programmer as part



of a new-hire initiative at Sega. That game never saw the light of day until 2022 as part of the Sega Genesis Mini 2.

However, one of his earliest responsibilities may have been his most impactful, as just a couple of weeks after joining the company, he helped Sega get Sonic the Hedgehog 2 out the door. Iizuka worked with the quality assurance team to test and debug the anticipated sequel prior to release. He still remembers having his mind blown the first time he discovered Sonic's transformation into Super Sonic.

Eight months into his time at Sega, Iizuka was brought on as a designer for the first project he would work on from the start: Sonic the Hedgehog 3. After bouncing around so much in the early portions of his career, Iizuka was happy to finally have a project he could see through from start to finish.

Sonic 3 and its successor, Sonic & Knuckles, were released to critical acclaim, but as the industry arrived in the mid '90s, Sonic Team started looking at moving away from the 2D pixel art style of graphics and into the world of 3D. Iizuka served as lead designer on the cult Sega Saturn hit Nights into Dream. Around that time, he also worked on a 3D prototype of Sonic running around in a field, to which the team added objectives and included as a special playable mode in the Sega Saturn compilation Sonic Jam.

Both of those games served as stepping stones to Sonic's first full 3D title: Sonic Adventure. Since Sonic didn't star in an all-new adventure on the 32X or Saturn, the series had fallen off. Iizuka was named director and tasked with bringing Sonic back with an exclamation point using the powerful new Dreamcast.

In 1999, following the success of Sonic Adventure, Iizuka relocated the team from Japan to San Francisco, California, in hopes of influencing the team through non-Japanese cultural references for its sequel. Development was going well, but despite his optimism about what Sonic Adventure 2 would do for Dreamcast sales, one morning, he awoke to shocking news: Sega was exiting the hardware business. Despite these ever-shifting sands, both Sonic Adventure games are still viewed as two of the most beloved entries in the series by fans.

Unfortunately, shortly after the highs of the Adventure series, the Sonic franchise began experiencing issues, with series figurehead Yuji Naka departing Sega in 2006. When Iizuka and Sonic Team relocated back to Japan around 2007, he realized a key problem. "The teams in Japan, the directors had this new idea and this vision of what they wanted to make for the next Sonic game," Iizuka says. "That's where you get Unleashed, Secret Rings, and 2006 Sonic the Hedgehog. And there's really no one at the top controlling it or managing everything. Like, each director and producer was doing their own take on what a Sonic title would be."

Iizuka wanted to establish a system that could deliver a more unified vision. Beginning with Sonic Colors in 2011, he stepped into the role of overseeing all Sonic game content. In 2016, Iizuka and much of Sonic Team once again relocated to the United States, this time to the Los Angeles, California area, where the team has continued basing its operations. Around that time, Sega implemented new measures to add deadline flexibility to ensure games have the time they need to be released in the best state possible.

Today, Iizuka serves as creative officer for Sonic Team, overseeing not just the games, but the partnerships, including merchandising, animation, and movies. Though he jokes that he doesn't get much spare time these days, he still enjoys reading the occasional manga or watching a highly recommended anime. He also holds a black belt in karate and a scuba-diving license for Advanced Open Water. However, as he tells me, he's been enjoying snorkeling more lately because he feels he's too old for scuba diving.

As someone who has been with the Sonic franchise for more than three decades, Iizuka has seen the highest of highs and the lowest of lows; and most importantly, he has weathered those storms and learned important lessons. Now, thanks to games like Sonic Frontiers and Sonic Superstars, as well as partnerships established under his supervision, the Sonic fan base feels optimism it hasn't felt since the Dreamcast era. ■

For more on Takashi Iizuka's career, visit our YouTube channel to see the full interview with him

INTERVIEW

A Link to the Future

Conversations with the developers of The Legend of Zelda

INTERVIEWS BY BRIAN SHEA

In 2023, I spent 90 minutes talking with The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom producer Eiji Aonuma and director Hidemaro Fujibayashi over the course of two sessions. The first interview took place in May, the day before Tears of the Kingdom launched, and the second took place in December, just before Tears of the Kingdom took home Game Informer's Game of the Year award. Below, you can find an abridged version of those conversations, with select quotes talking about the state of the Zelda franchise.

The Zelda series has been running for more than three decades now, and it's still putting out critically acclaimed entries nearly every time. What do you think is the most important factor for how the development team is able to sustain this high level of quality over such a long period of time?

Hidemaro Fujibayashi: I think some of it has to do with the fact that we have a unique and diverse set of people in our teams in that they have all kinds of hobbies; it's not only just people who play games. And they have these hobbies that they enjoy, and they take that fun that they experience in their real lives and try to drop the essence of those elements into the games that they create. Having that environment where they feel like they can freely develop and use their creativity to drop these into the games they're working on, I think, plays a critical role in allowing for very diverse and unique games to be created.

Eiji Aonuma: When it comes to Nintendo's development, I think we have a bit of tenacity with the ideas that we come up with. So, as you may be aware, Mr. Fujibayashi was the director of The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, and in this game, he had the desire to give Link the ability to seamlessly descend from the sky and then, after landing, kind of proceed from there. That was something that, given the time, he was unable to do, but I think that this idea is something that probably stuck with him and stayed in his head. When it came time to make games of a different kind and the type or the shape of the game might change those, those opportunities arise when you can find a way, maybe from a different angle, of implementing that idea that you've kept with you all this time.

This is something I think [Mario and Zelda creator] Mr. Miyamoto has said in the past, but when you have an idea and try to make it work, and it doesn't work out, you don't give up on that idea. Instead, just wait for the right opportunity to arrive. Those ideas – and I think this is true of our developers – stick around in their heads; they keep them with them as they continue in their work. When those things pile up, and the right opportunity presents itself, we find the opportunity to implement those ideas.

Breath of the Wild was such a change from the rest of the franchise, but it still felt like a Zelda game. When you're implementing new features and innovating in such drastic ways with a long-running and beloved series like The Legend of Zelda, is there nervousness it might alienate longtime fans?

EA: Well, it's just as you said: Making sure that Zelda-ness or that Zelda feel is really in the game. I think that's a really important point. Even if a game like Breath of the Wild has really big changes in it, as long as the fans and the players are able to feel that this is a Zelda game at its core when they play the game, that is something that is really important for us when meeting fans' expectations.

HF: And really, when we're talking about this, I guess, essence of Zelda, as long as we preserve that, then I think it provides us with the freedom to really build Zelda, and it can become many different things. For example, it could be a puzzle game, an adventure game, or an action game. All of these moments that can be dropped into a game help it become a Zelda-like game as long as that essence is preserved.

When you're developing a new Zelda title your primary focus is on core gameplay, but the timeline placement discussion has become prevalent among the fans of the series. How much consideration and importance does the development team put into those discussions?

HF: As you mentioned, we realized that fans have a great time theorizing and enjoy thinking about where things fit on the timeline. That's something that the development team recognizes and it considers, but to an extent. And I say, "to an extent" because if we get too into the weeds or too detailed in that placement, it results in kind of creating restraints for our creativity; the process of creating new ideas becomes restricted because we're so tied up and trying to make this fit into a very specific spot in the timeline. We do consider it, but not to an extent where we feel that our development process feels restricted or constrained.

I think a lot of people share the viewpoint that Ocarina of Time was the starting point for one era of Zelda games, laying the foundation for the several titles that came after it. Do you see Breath of the Wild as establishing the new blueprint or foundation of the next several Zelda games for years to come?

EA: With Ocarina of Time, I think it's correct to say that it did kind of create a format for a number of titles in the franchise that came after it. But in some ways, that was a little bit restricting for us. While we always aim to give the player freedoms of certain kinds, there were certain things that format didn't really afford in giving people freedom. Of course, the series continued to evolve after Ocarina of Time, but I think it's also fair to say now that we've arrived at Breath of the Wild and the new type of more open play and freedom that it affords. Yeah, I think it's correct to say that it has created a new kind of format for the series to proceed from.

Earlier, you confirmed there won't be any DLC for Tears of the Kingdom because you've accomplished everything you want to accomplish with this game – have you ruled out another direct sequel?

EA: [Laughs] Well, that would be a sequel to a sequel, which is getting a little bit wild when you think about it! But as I've mentioned previously, with Tears of the Kingdom, we were seeking to build on top of the world we created with Breath of the Wild and really exhaust the possibilities of what we could put into that world. I think it is – to use a bit of a term – an apotheosis, or the final form of that version of The Legend of Zelda. In that regard, I don't think that we'll be making a direct sequel to a world such as that that we've created. ■

Read the unabridged interviews on how Hidemaro Fujibayashi and Eiji Aonuma approached Tears of the Kingdom and the state of Zelda at GameInformer.com

OPINION

Final Fantasy XVI's Echoes of the Fallen DLC is the Game at its Best

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

Final Fantasy XVI was one of my favorite games of 2023. Between its bombastic boss fights, trope-breaking cast of characters, and story of humankind against the shackles of nobility and religion that keep it held down, it resonated with me in many ways. However, it wasn't without its problems. As the sixteenth mainline entry in the Final Fantasy franchise, it's arguably one of the weakest RPGs in series history. Crafting felt meaningless and void of choice, side quests often fell flat, and customization was mostly nonexistent outside of Eikonic abilities. But FFXVI's first DLC, Echoes of the Fallen, sheds my biggest problems with the base game. What's left is FFXVI at its best: a linear action game with characters I love.

Set before the final events of FFXVI's climax, Echoes of the Fallen plays out like a side quest. You investigate mysterious crystals popping up on a black market, track it to the source, and discover a new Mothercrystal protagonist Clive and the gang didn't even know existed. After a few objectives in the Valisthea overworld, Clive, Jill, Joshua, and best-pup Torgal arrive at said Mothercrystal, and the next two hours is a gauntlet of arena combat encounters, various minibosses, and a fantastic final boss.

This Mothercrystal acts as a trial for players, forcing you to take down waves of enemies and minibosses to reach its climactic end. It's great, largely because, unlike the base game, you're treated to awesome fight after fight without the often-bland fluff and escort missions that must happen between the base game's own impressive fights. Because Echoes of the Fallen takes place mostly in this Mothercrystal, there aren't opportunities for Mid at the Hideaway to task you with boring fetch quests, visits to the blacksmith to craft a sword that doesn't do anything different but hit a little harder, nor long bouts of running from one place to the next.

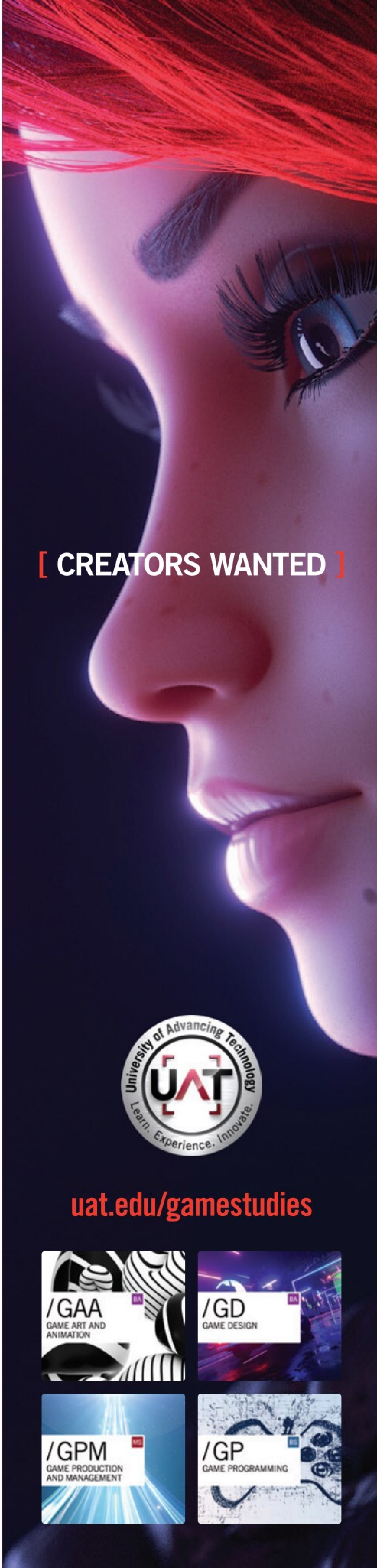
Echoes of the Fallen hits you with new enemies using moves you've never seen and after a quick breather between fights, another wave of foes appears to surprise and test you. And just when these enemies start to feel monotonous, developer Creative Business Unit III hits you with a miniboss, forcing you to reshape your approach, upping the action ante in the process.

Mind you, FFXVI certainly delivered on the same action front present in Echoes of the Fallen. But it lacks the lightning-fast pacing of the DLC that gets you right back to the action. Clive, Jill, and Joshua spend moments piecing together what's happening in this mysterious Mothercrystal between fights but take a couple of steps forward and the highlight of FFXVI – the action – returns.

The DLC confirms to me that FFXVI isn't a great RPG, but it is a fantastic action game. Its combat has been my favorite in years, and when I wasn't in a fight in the campaign, I wanted to be. Echoes of the Fallen speaks directly to that. It cuts away FFXVI's fluff where it attempted to be an RPG and reflects a parallel timeline where FFXVI leans even heavier into its Devil May Cry inspiration, delivering arena after arena where its action can truly shine.

And I say all this without mentioning Echoes of the Fallen's unique final boss fight, where Creative Business Unit III stretches its Final Fantasy XIV wings to infuse its fast-paced action with MMO-isms that coalesce into something remarkable to take part in.

If FFXVI wasn't your jam, Echoes of the Fallen might be, and at the very least, it's worth a return to Valisthea if only to hear composer Masayoshi Soken's theme for the final fight. ■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GEAR

TECH TO STEP UP YOUR GAME

BY MATT MILLER

GUNNAR
GUNNAR
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❶ GUNNAR INTERCEPT ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE EYEWEAR

For anyone who spends a significant chunk of time in front of a gaming or work display, eye strain can rapidly go from a minor annoyance to a debilitating frustration. A good pair of blue-light-blocking glasses can go a long way to reducing eye dryness and fatigue. Gunnar's latest partnership with Ubisoft lets you do so with a visual nod to the recent Assassin's Creed Mirage release. Gunnar has been at this for a while now, and it shows through the anti-reflective lens and impressive resistance to smudging. Beyond help with screen blue light, you also get 100% UV blockage if you're heading out from the Bureau.

$85 | *gunnar.com*

❷ RCA EVOLUTION PREMIUM MONITOR

Finding a solid gaming monitor at a reasonable price can be a real trick, but RCA has come out swinging with its first foray into gaming displays, pushing forward an affordable high-refresh option that performs admirably and doesn't break the bank. While older players may remember the brand for its forays into TVs and radios back in the day, this new drive into the modern market is nothing old-fashioned. The 27-inch, 1440p 240Hz display provides a sharp, inviting image with rich colors that perform competitively, especially at this price point. Ample ports and numerous image quality customization options make it easy to overlook the overly wide tripod design and unremarkable bevel, which aren't likely to win any design awards. Even so, this is a strong display without pretension and a great option if you're not looking to pay up into the more expensive buzzword-heavy options on the market.

$369 | *rcamonitors.com*

❸ DROP + EPOS PC38X GAMING HEADSET

Players looking for a rich, warm, and vibrant soundscape will find a lot to love in this thumping over-ear set. The open-back design ensures a broad and concert-like sound quality, an effect I strongly recommend trying out if you've always felt like headphones produce a too "enclosed" audio experience. The bass/treble mix is extremely satisfying, offering a punchy and powerful mix that does a stellar job separating distinct sound sources, such as roaring gunfire and all-important mission dialogue. The headset aims to provide a top-notch out-of-box experience but offers little in the way of sound customization, and only a wired connection. However, that might be just fine for many gamers, who can break out these unassuming, comfortable, and lightweight cans and dive into their favorite recent release without delay.

$169 | *drop.com*

❹ NACON REVOLUTION 5 PRO CONTROLLER

Gamers have no shortage of admirable controller options to select between these days, so it's really become about picking the features you're most interested in. Nacon offers some boast-worthy features in its premium PS5/PS4/PC controller, but its high price and unique design aren't for everyone. The asymmetric thumbstick layout should appeal if you prefer the Xbox paradigm in a PlayStation-targeted controller, and those same thumbsticks feature Hall effect functionality, dramatically reducing the chance of stick drift. The build is top-notch, with comfortable textured grips, an array of additional button inputs on the backside, trigger blockers to alter pull distance, and its wired or wireless (via USB dongle) functionality lets you play the way you wish. You also get varying weights, stick sizes, and full internal customization. While the presence of a touchpad is laudable, some players may bemoan the absence of PS5 haptics – a standout feature on the first-party DualSense. But if that's not your cup of tea, this high-end option might be a perfect fit in hand. ■

$200 | *nacongaming.com*

> "Players looking for a rich, warm, and vibrant soundscape will find a lot to love in this thumping over-ear set."

ON THE EVE OF APEX LEGENDS' FIFTH ANNIVERSARY, RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT UNVEILS EXCLUSIVE FUTURE DETAILS AND OUTLINES WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A BATTLE ROYALE CHAMPION

by Jason Guisao

LIVING LEGENDS

A SMOKESCREEN BLANKETS THE WAR-TORN STREET.

Squadmates eliminated and health dangerously low, you fling your teleportation bracelet toward a distant building and slip away from the firefight. Once inside, you press your body to the front door and pop a regenerative Phoenix Kit, vitality slowly returning with each second. But the healing process is halted when Seer stuns you through the wall with his micro-drone scanner. As the enemy nears, you ready your Peacekeeper shotgun. Seer's steel boot connects with the door; it crumbles into glass-metal shards, but you don't flinch. You line up the shot, weapon hissing uncontrollably, and …

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 60-Player Online Shooter
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER** Respawn Entertainment **RELEASE** February 4, 2019

BANG!

CLASH OF THE TITANS

The Battle Royale genre's (BR) impact on the competitive shooter scene is undeniable. Take, for example, Daybreak's H1Z1. The three-year early access marvel might be a relic by today's standards, but Brendan "PlayerUnknown" Greene's consultation work on it informed his later game, PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds, which then inspired Fortnite. Treyarch followed suit with Call of Duty: Black Ops 4's Blackout mode (the first iteration of what we now know as Warzone). And then Respawn Entertainment joined the lobby.

By early 2019, Respawn had flown under the radar for almost two years. Titanfall 2 dropped in 2016 and was lauded for its fluid gameplay and explosive mech battles, but sales were lower than expected. Several DLCs throughout 2017 kept dedicated fans satisfied, but 2018 was a period of radio silence – because the team's next massive project was underway. On February 4, 2019, Respawn launched Apex Legends. When we asked about the general secrecy and surprise release five years ago, former executive producer Drew McCoy emphasized transparency. This might seem contradictory, but McCoy told us the decision was a power move.

"We know this game has skepticism around it," McCoy said. "It's not Titanfall 3. It's battle royale, which, for some people, is a fad right now. Instead of trying to convince a skeptical audience with marketing and interviews, why not just let the game speak for itself? The best antidote for any skepticism is to see and hopefully believe."

If seeing truly is believing, Apex Legends is a prime example of the adage. Respawn's Titanfall-themed BR touted a free-to-play model, responsive gunplay/physics due to an upgraded Source engine, and diverse playable characters that resonated with a growing audience. Revolutionary new mechanics – a non-verbal Ping System and Respawn Beacons – changed players' understanding of in-game communication while also deconstructing the one-life-per-match rule that made the genre equally exhilarating and frustrating. In eight hours, the hero shooter drew over one million unique players. And by the end of February, it surpassed 50 million (also earning a whopping $92 million through in-game purchases), at the time, eclipsing even Fortnite's impressive growth trajectory. The greatest form of flattery is imitation, so it's no surprise that Apex's various unique features made their way to other prominent BRs. And a healthy end-of-the-year awards season was just the icing on the cake.

From Christmas-themed locations and ever-changing maps to overhauled legend roles and the recent Final Fantasy VII crossover, Respawn gradually redefined its approach to battle royale. And now, half a decade later, the team is gearing up for a titanic shift with Season 20: Breakout. We visited the studio's Vancouver office, played hours of new content, and spoke with leadership and numerous game, art, and narrative designers about their design pillars, the evolution of Apex, and some of the biggest updates on the horizon.

SITREP

The Vancouver office is pristine. Its expansive second floor is awash with elaborate Apex murals; a striking timberwood staircase towers over the workspace. Out beyond an endless row of window walls, a chill mist engulfs the horizon. Despite the bitter cold and somber, milky skyline, there's an air of excitement among the few devs scattered throughout the common area: Today is Season 20 playtest day.

Game director Steven Ferreira and design director Evan Nikolich plop down in front of me on an L-shaped sofa. When I ask them to speak about their five-year battle royale journey, both stress the importance of community feedback and adaptability. Live service games foster rapid, sometimes brutal, workflows, but the two directors enjoy the challenges of the content-heavy format.

"I've been working on live service games for 12 years now," Nikolich starts. "And I much prefer it in terms of having that direct connection with the player. You're building the game alongside and for them instead of for yourself."

That methodology extends to Season 20, which Ferreira hopes will be a suitable answer to widespread gripes with match difficulty. There's nothing worse than getting steamrolled instantaneously by a premade squad of rare-badged Apex Predators, but, of course, backend countermeasures are in place to help remedy that issue. A lengthy Respawn blog post from January 2023 dove into the various matchmaking combinations used to categorize players, from straightforward skill comparisons to optimizing wait times. But at its core, Season 20 is all about leveling the playing field.

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2 SQUADS LEFT
MAX LEVEL
WINGMAN

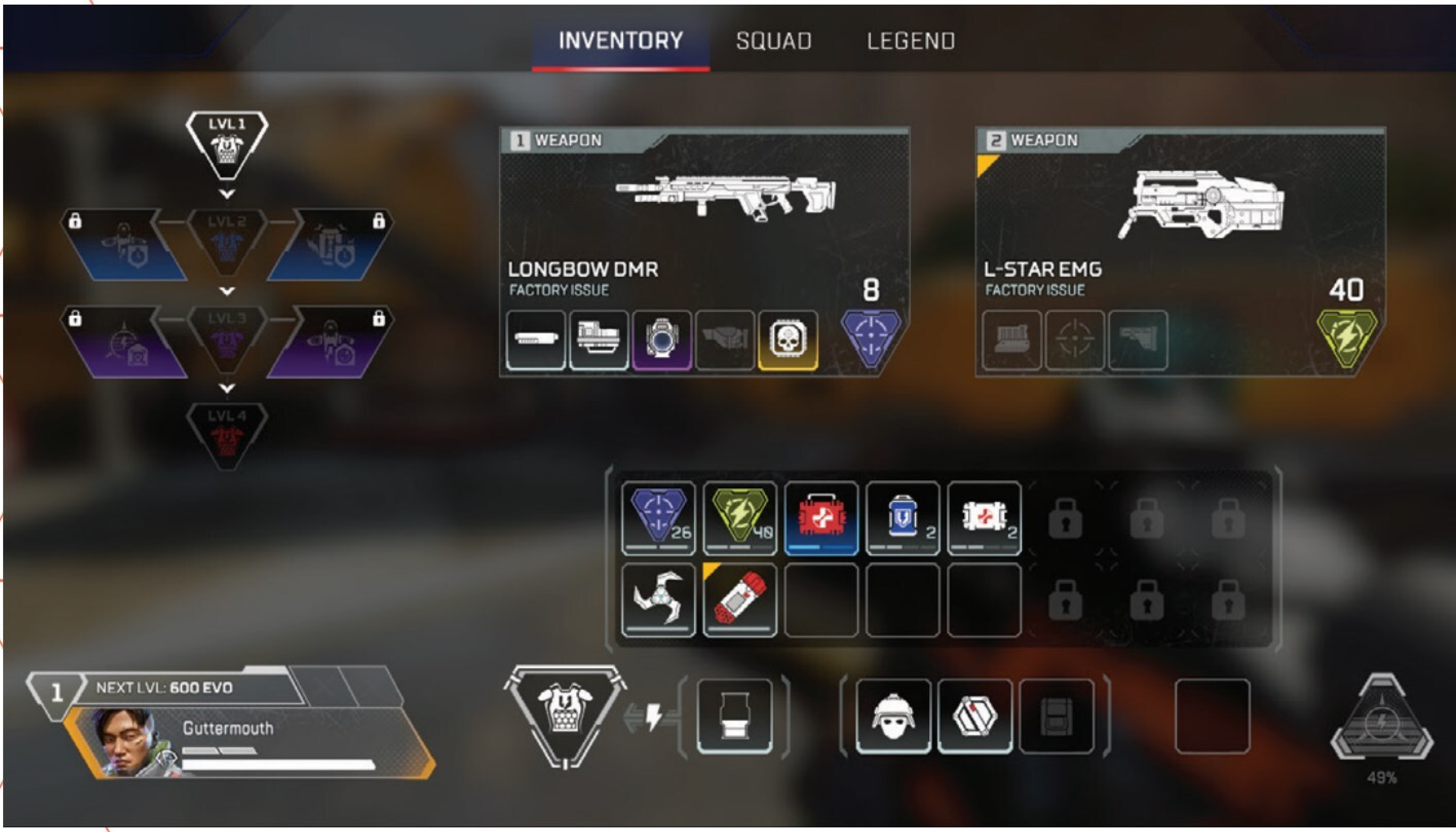
“Apex is hard,” Ferreira admits. “I think as we look back retrospectively – as we added more features and as the community just got better and better with the game itself – the difficulty floor kept rising. There are just a lot of stone-cold killers out there in the community. So, what we’re trying to do is reset the table a bit. And find ways to get new players, who just aren't as far on the competitive spectrum, a window to engage and fall in love with Apex the way that we've all had that opportunity to fall in love with it.”

Among a bevy of incoming features, including a 120-hertz performance setting and haptics for PlayStation 5 controllers, two major updates are set to improve the experience for players of all levels: a legend-based progression system and a new limited-time mode (LTM) that accelerates the BR formula. Both directors assert this latest Season is a new arc, and in the spirit of Drew McCoy’s statement in 2019, the design process continues to spotlight transparency. An overhauled Match Summary (post-game report) is a testament to this, revealing the behind-the-scenes scoring system for Ranked and informing competitors about why they won or lost their matches. Asynchronous tournaments also roll out later this year, giving players more ways to compete at all skill levels. For Respawn, transparency seems to be synonymous with approachability.

POWER TRIP:
Evolving With Legend Upgrades

Metas across all prominent shooters are in constant flux, and they should be. Apex Legends is no stranger to the multiplayer-centric phenomenon, as surges in character, weapon, and strategy combinations are often strong indicators of mechanical depth and experimentation. As lead legend designer Devan McGuire and game designer John Larson explain the philosophies behind Apex’s latest features, I immediately recall Nikolich’s fascination with designing alongside players.

Since launch, Respawn has played an active role in meta alterations, removing popular weapons like the



R-301 carbine and Wingman revolver from the standard loot pool and placing them in rare care packages or Replicators (crafting machines) to encourage the usage of other neglected firearms. Even legends with skewed win rates got modifications, leading to more diversified and dynamic battles. Some changes, however, were more extreme than others. Revenant, a legend first introduced in 2020, was the subject of a total rework in Season 18 that saw his pick rate increase by over 90 percent. Balancing updates might not be unique to Apex Legends, but this Season is slated to shake up future patches in unconventional ways.

McGuire tells me Season 16's major class updates laid the groundwork for Season 20's new progression system. Legends fall under five distinct classes—Assault, Skirmisher, Recon, Controller, or Support—and class-specific perks expand upon these categories with new abilities. Recons, for instance, gain access to Survey Beacons scattered around the map, revealing enemy locations for 30 seconds. Support capabilities, on the other hand, are two-fold. Legends like Gibraltar and Newcastle can open hidden shelves in blue-colored supply bins, gifting their squad extra healing items in a pinch, while their invaluable ability to craft Respawn Banners increases the chance of late-game comebacks. Season 20 will build upon this blueprint by introducing bite-sized skill trees.

"Class upgrades reinvigorated the meta and changed the way people thought about the game strategically," McGuire says. "We wanted to take another stab at getting more intimate with the characters themselves, diving into the types of builds that can be made." Larson doubles down on this: "Legends remain relatively static amidst all the variables in a BR. You pick them at the start of the match, and that choice is constant throughout. So, we recognize that people express themselves or have playstyles with a certain legend. We wanted to explicitly lean into that a bit more in terms of allowing players to make these choices that scale across the course of a match. That felt compelling and worth exploring."

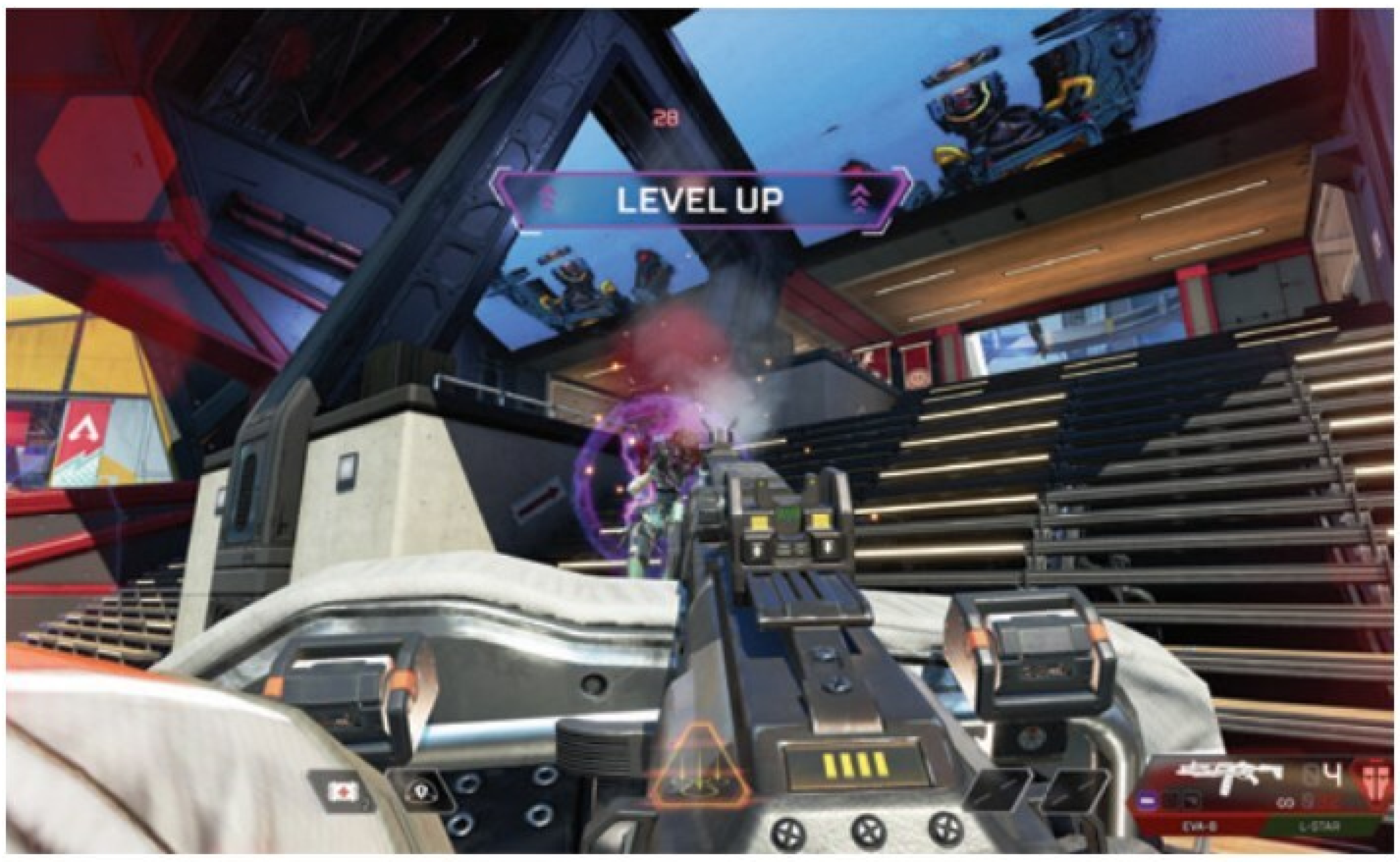
SHOOT FOR THE STARS, AIM FOR THE MOON

Skulltown, Capitol City, Bonsai Plaza, The Pylon – places of friction, as lead map designer Ran Stayer aptly puts it, riddled with deathboxes. All locales are built with engagements in mind, but a select few inspire trepidation. Promenade, one of the latest sites from Season 15's Broken Moon, literally slices the map in half. It's a veritable death trap, which is to say it's a hell of a lot of fun. "You always want to design with intent; you have goals in mind for every space," Stayer tells me. "One goal I have when making essential POIs [points of interest] like Promenade is to promote the sense of fear when going to the middle of the map. I wanted to give players a particular challenge to overcome, and I think it's a conscious choice of, 'Are we going to risk dying, or do we have time to go the long way around?' In that vein, I think it's successful."

Broken Moon itself is a sprawling environment of celestial proportions, boasting shell-pink, psychedelic clouds and industrial depots reclaimed by nature. Resorts with draconic topiaries, the last few vestiges of civilization, are repurposed arenas for all-out war. Stayer mentions that all maps begin as hooks. In Broken Moon's case, there were several: cosmic catastrophe, heaven and hell, Monet paintings, English garden vibes, zip rail traversal, and even low-gravity mechanics during conceptualization. Some of these motifs were left on the cutting room floor, but from an artistic standpoint, Broken Moon is a feast for the eyes. Thankfully, subtle visual cues keep players focused on the task at hand.

"Some of our gameplay assets have a certain saturation level that we maintain so you know where the loot bins or doors are," world director Ed Agostini says. "And then sometimes we'll use warm light to guide you towards doorways or chokepoints. We try to landmark or set some kind of visual path to the next POI. We're always trying to get the best composition."

As far as design challenges go, Agostini acknowledges the difficulties that come with making each map unique and delightful for players as the team gets deeper into the BR's lifecycle, "You want to find things that people can relate to, yet you also want to create this surreal universe that's sci-fi and exciting and aspirational. We're always trying to find that balance."



Their efforts paid off. During my playtest session, I hopped into a game as Wattson, spotted the blocky frame of a new, work-in-progress map location, and glided down to see what treasures (and brawls) awaited. While grabbing a Flatline assault rifle from a nearby bin, I overheard the pitter-patter of Lifeline's boots and tracked the pesky medic down to a nearby pyramid. A few well-timed crouch-strafes and auto-bursts later, I found myself standing over her deathbox. Suddenly, a "You Leveled Up!" notification flashed across my screen, and I was greeted with two enticing upgrades. My eyes glazed over excitedly until I realized the catch: I could only choose one. And later, after barely overcoming a particularly sweaty squad, another tier of skills populated my HUD. In a matter of a few clicks (and rounds of heavy ammo), my Wattson had transformed into a one-woman army, sporting two shield – and health – recharging Intercept Pylons and an affinity for spawning Arc Star grenades. I've been in my fair share of gunfights across ten-thousand matches, but these new upgrades make combat, and the legends themselves, feel fresh again.

"The ability for a character to not just remain static means that you can take this idea of what an early-game interaction might be and play off the abilities that you can upgrade in those first tiers," McGuire says. "Then think about the positioning you have on the map, who's in your squad, and what those next upgrades are that you want to take to end game for those final rings. And I think that can influence the competitive scene or how you play with particular squad comps. I think that can impact the meta in a pretty huge way."

LEGENDS AREN'T BORN, THEY'RE MADE

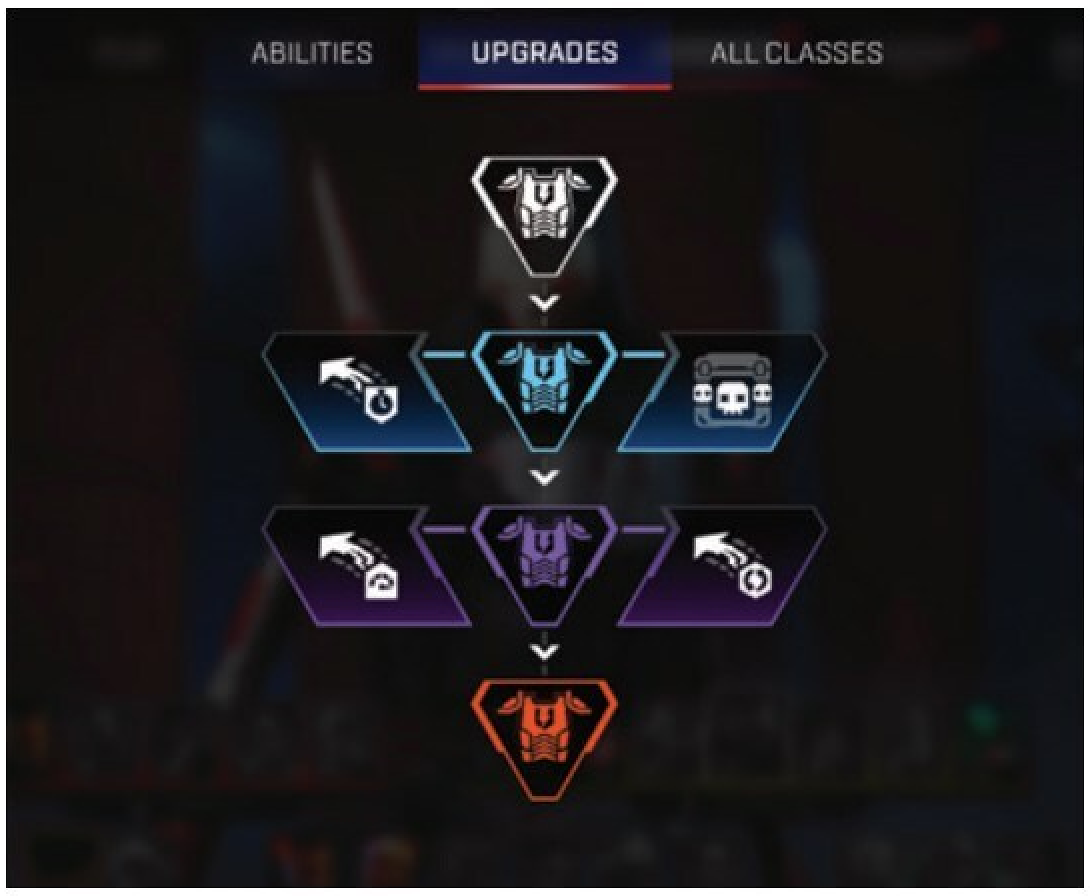
If combat is the soul of Respawn's frenetic shooter, the legends are the heart. And that heart shines through in every personalized kit, animation (who didn't chuckle at Wraith's pre-patch ninja run?), cosmetic, and voice line. Lead legend designer Devan McGuire, narrative director Amanda Doiron, and lead character concept artist Brett Marting reveal that the legend creation process, from prototype (humanoid dummies, like the ones you might find in the Firing Range) to final iteration, can take years to complete. No one character is the same, but the tried and tested design methods are.

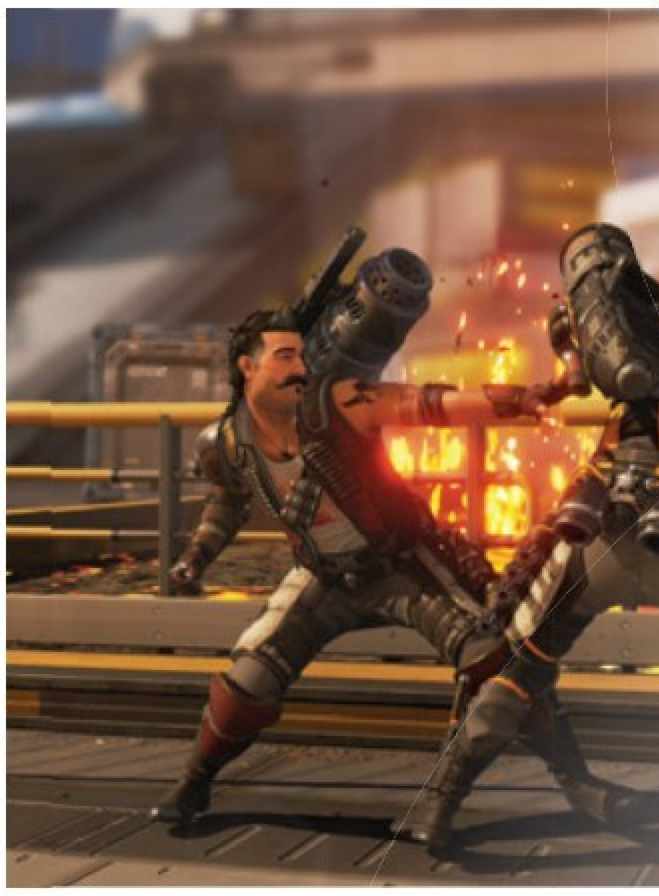
"We have three core sets of pillars," McGuire says. "Apex Legends is a weapon-first game, a squad-based game, and a BR at its core. So, if we make abilities that break the rules – like playing with the ring or usurping the loot pool – those are fundamentals of the BR that we don't want to hit on. We don't want our abilities to *just* do damage; weapons are king. And a single character should never be the answer to every problem."

Doiron agreed, stating respectful representation is also key, "We focus more heavily on character-based stories, rather than plot-heavy ones. And that's all the more reason to have these deeper characters. As far as authenticity, we do a lot of checks and balances by including people who have those backgrounds. We also hire authenticity editors. Relatability and humanity – if that's not done well, legends don't feel grounded."

As the game's roster grows, fans should feel empowered to project themselves onto or identify with their favorite prizefighters. But this special player-to-legend connection is acutely felt by *everyone*, devs included. "Seeing yourself in the character," Marting remarks. "I think that's one of the things we tried to get: Being able to embody the fantasy. That's the aspiration. And it doesn't matter who the character is necessarily. If you can feel a little bit like them while you're playing, then I think our job has been accomplished."

Beyond simply eliminating the opposition, an array of basic in-game activities, like scanning care packages, hitting Beacons, and opening bins (to name a few), trigger XP gains and make the legend-leveling process more user-friendly. An underdog bonus even kicks in when squads with modest equipment (lower-tier armor) defeat combatants with more valuable gear. McGuire and Larson confirm that these design choices should help ease beginners into the gameplay loop by limiting sensory overload and prioritizing readability.





FAST & FURIOUS: Going Turbo With LTMs

In a way, experimental limited-time modes (LTMs) function as large-scale public playtests, pushing the boundaries of BR mechanics to new heights while also offering much-needed breaks from the occasional losing streak in the base game. Lead battle royale designer Joshua Mohan tells me that Season 20's new mode, Straight Shot, is known internally as "Nitro," and for good reason.

"We're constantly playtesting, and sometimes you can't get a full group of 60 together," Mohan says. "So, the design team will launch a mode called Nitro. You start the match randomly positioned on the ground in a smaller ring with fewer players. And we've been playing that for years and thought, 'Can't we bring this to the players? We have fun playing this; will they enjoy it, too?' That's why we added the drop ships, so you have some idea of where you are in the world. We got rid of attachments so that you can just run, pick up a kitted weapon, and go. So, you still have this sense of progression. Then we just kept adding things to make it faster and more arcade-y."

Trim the excess to underscore the facets of Apex that matter most: strategic movement and combat. This might seem like a step back, but Mohan assures me Straight Shot is a more streamlined way to play that makes it easier for casual players to "find the fun" in the legend-upgrade system and then bring their learnings back to the base battle royale mode.

My squad and I load into Olympus, and the dropship automatically ejects us toward the boxing-themed area, Fight Night. I barely make out the multicolored dive trails of one other team as we touch down. The ring feels practically on our heels, and only 10 squads populate the map, but this is intentional – Straight Shot rounds are supposed to be quicker/shorter, after all. I pick up a gold RE-45 auto pistol, but my time with the valuable weapon is cut short as Mad Maggie drops down from a ledge and decimates me with a few shotgun pumps. My friends are eventually hunted and finished off. I prepare to return to the lobby, but my squadmate reminds me we can now queue into the next match from the spectator screen. We only play for a little longer, but as a naturally aggressive player with over thirty-thousand lifetime kills, I appreciate the lack of an overlong mid-game. Instead of landing, looting, and spending a sizeable portion of the match looking for adversaries, the compactness of Straight Shot's arenas means action is a guarantee. The LTM feels like a smart blend of approachability and what Mohan calls "competitive integrity."

"I think one hallmark for us is focusing on making Apex a great competitive shooter because that's

our identity in a lot of ways," he says. "The funny thing we found is the needs of the casual players and the highest-level players sometimes meet back around at the end. Battle royale has this sort of roguelike feeling – you never know what you're going to get; you play the cards you're dealt. But on the most casual end, people sometimes experience randomness as overwhelming or frustrating or arbitrary, and they bounce off the game as a result. Then on the highest end, you have people feeling like it's unfair. You shouldn't feel like randomness determines the outcome. So, that's the goal in the coming year."

LAST MAN STANDING

The sun dips low, casting long shadows across a series of empty cubicles. It's closing time, and people are slowly filing out of the office. Back by the L-shaped couch, leadership reflects on Season 20's biggest takeaways and what comes next.

"Season after Season, we're constantly challenging what we believe to be the core of the game," Nikolich says. "How do we change core systems while still making it feel like Apex? In the coming year, our goal is to bring new players in, because they're the lifeblood of the game. But also keep our diehards, people who've been with us since Season 0, engaged, because they're the champions of the game."

After more discussion about taking risks and making meaningful changes, Nikolich declares nothing is sacred. I can't help but think about how that mindset applies to the future content I briefly saw during my playtest session – namely, the next Skirmisher legend and map in Respawn's ever-growing lineup. "Apex is still a very young universe," Agostini adds. "And we're just getting started." ■

Looking for more on the future of Apex Legends? Visit GameInformer.com/ApexLegends, where we'll be rolling out additional interviews, videos, and features over the coming weeks, including a deeper look at legend upgrades, developer insights into Revenant's recent rework, and Season 20 gameplay

WELCOME TO THE BIG LEAGUES

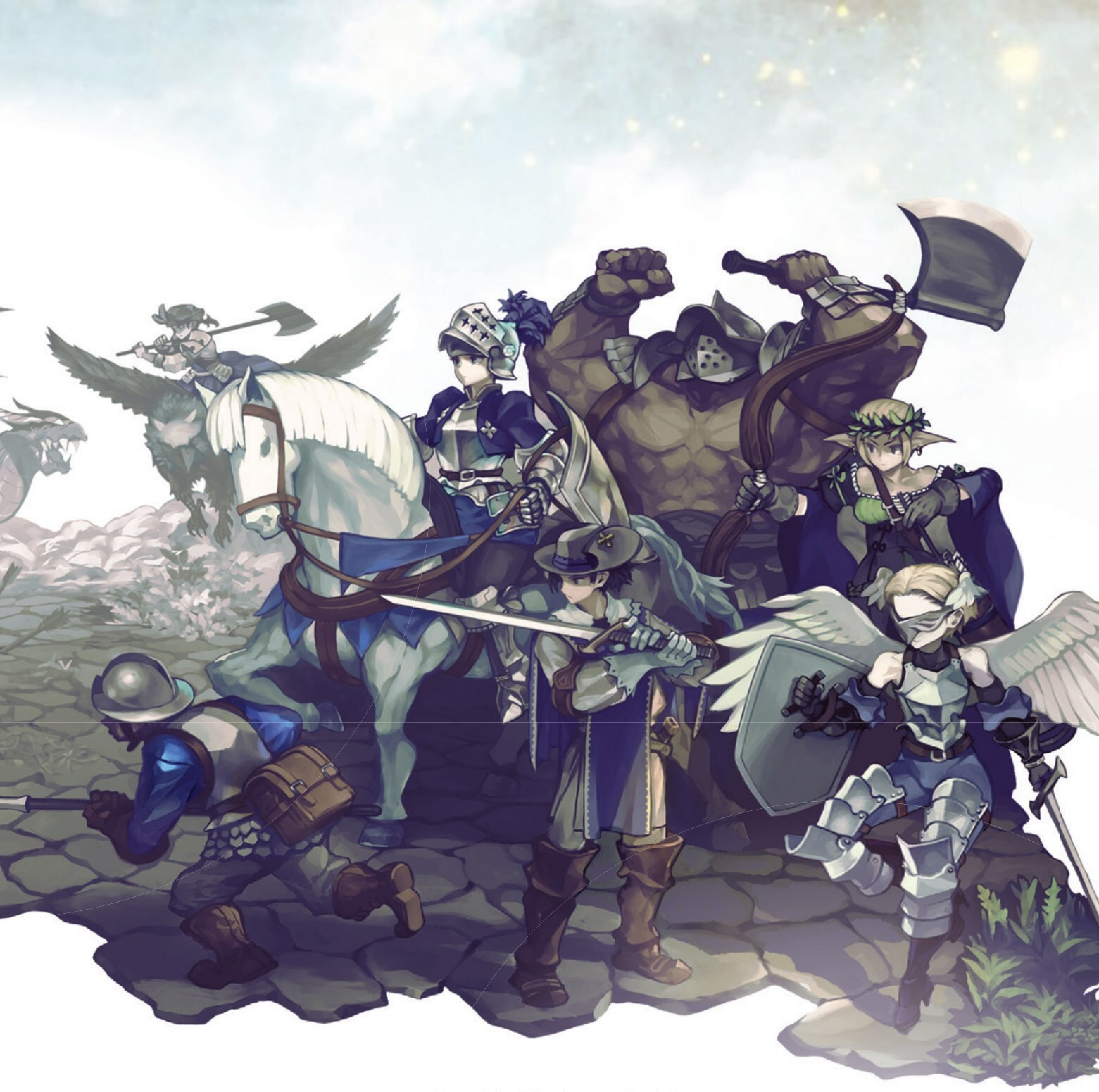
It's the final day of the Apex Legends Global Series (ALGS) tournament, and not even BR's most storied shot-caller, ImperialHal, could have predicted his team would hoist the championship trophy. Senior brand marketing manager Jasmine Chiang fondly remembers sitting in the starstruck crowd when TSM clawed its way to the top from 15th place. Confetti and pyrotechnics appropriately capped off a groundbreaking tournament as ALGS Year 3 amassed a total watch time of 47.9 million hours. The numbers are staggering, but commissioner John Nelson tells me he knew Apex would bear a successful competitive circuit from the very first playtest – the implementation of a Match Point system early on was the esport's biggest differentiator. "In ALGS Finals, teams must reach a 50-point threshold and then win a match to win the tournament," Nelson says. "When we introduced Match Point in 2019, it took what were often anticlimactic endings to battle royale tournaments and turned them into an edge-of-your-seat sport."

In addition to hosting several inclusion initiatives, like amateur competitions that give up-and-comers a platform to reach pro status, the team is sweetening the pot for Year 4. Chiang talks about supplying financial stipends and exposure opportunities to partnered pro teams, bolstering the competitive ecosystem while giving players the stability they deserve. And Nelson lists some big changes coming to the ALGS format, including Bonus Points which offer opportunities for teams to earn "extra credit" when performing at a high level. "We're committed to continually raising the bar in service of our players and fans," Chiang concludes.

A RETURN to FANTASY

Vanillaware is diving back into its fantasy roots with its new tactical RPG, Unicorn Overlord, with hopes of making the genre even more fun and approachable

by WESLEY LeBLANC



VANILLAWARE MAKES EXCELLENT GAMES, from GrimGrimoire to Odin Sphere to Dragon's Crown. However, it wasn't until its 2019 release, 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim, that the developer's name became synonymous with "you should play this team's games." It's hard to tell what, exactly, made 13 Sentinels the breakout title for Vanillaware, shipping more than 1 million copies worldwide as of August last year, making it the studio's best-selling title. The easy answer is probably its beloved story, both in how it plays out and how it's infused into the game's real-time strategy mech combat.

Publisher Atlus and Vanillaware released it in 2019, so when the team announced its latest title, Unicorn Overlord, last September, it was easy to conclude that this was the studio's next big focus. And it is, but curiously, I learned in an exclusive preview of the game Vanillaware conceived it during the development of 13 Sentinels, with its creation handled in parallel with that game, albeit with a different team and director.

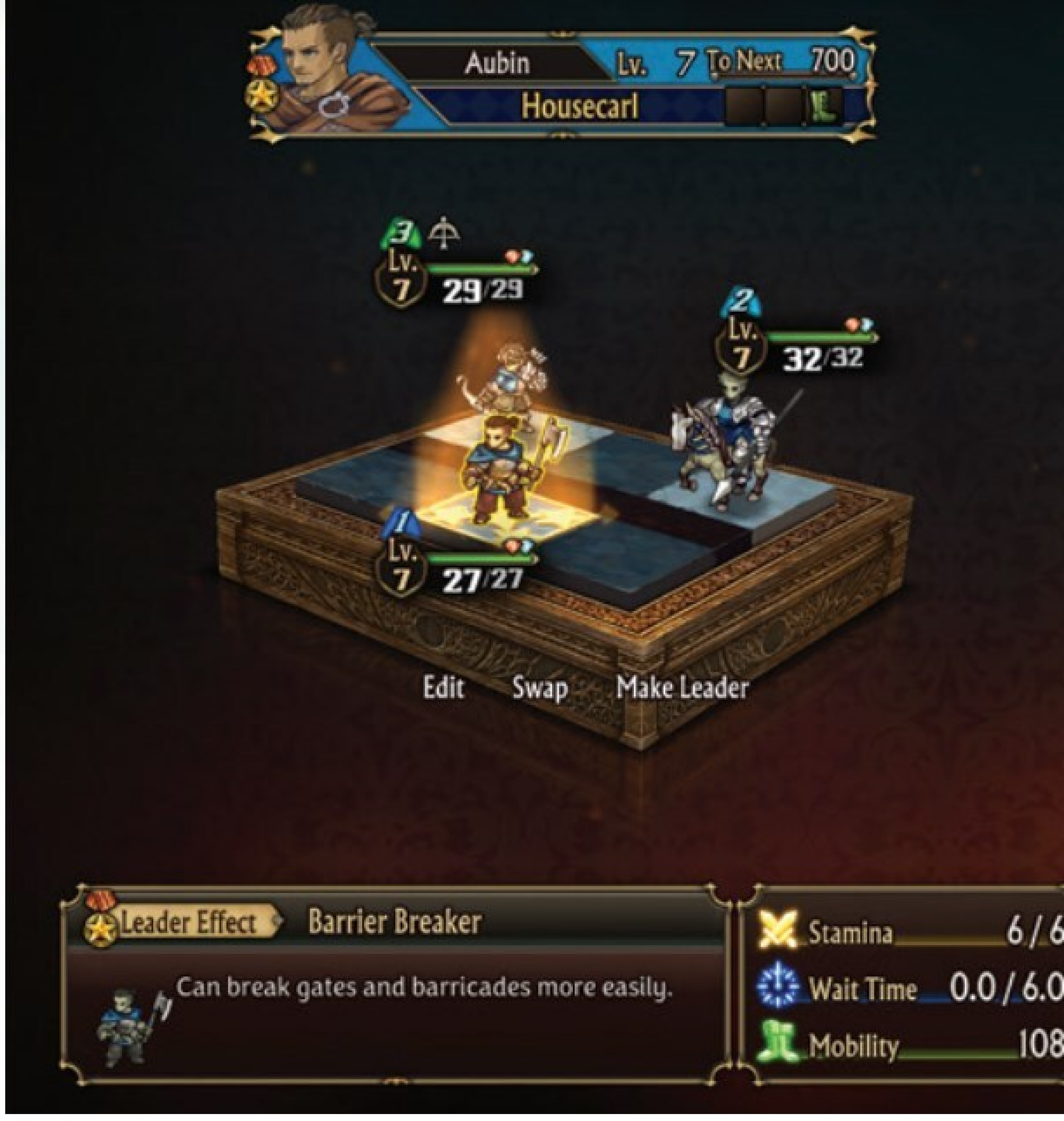
PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Switch

STYLE
1-Player Strategy

PUBLISHER
Atlus

DEVELOPER
Vanillaware

RELEASE
March 8

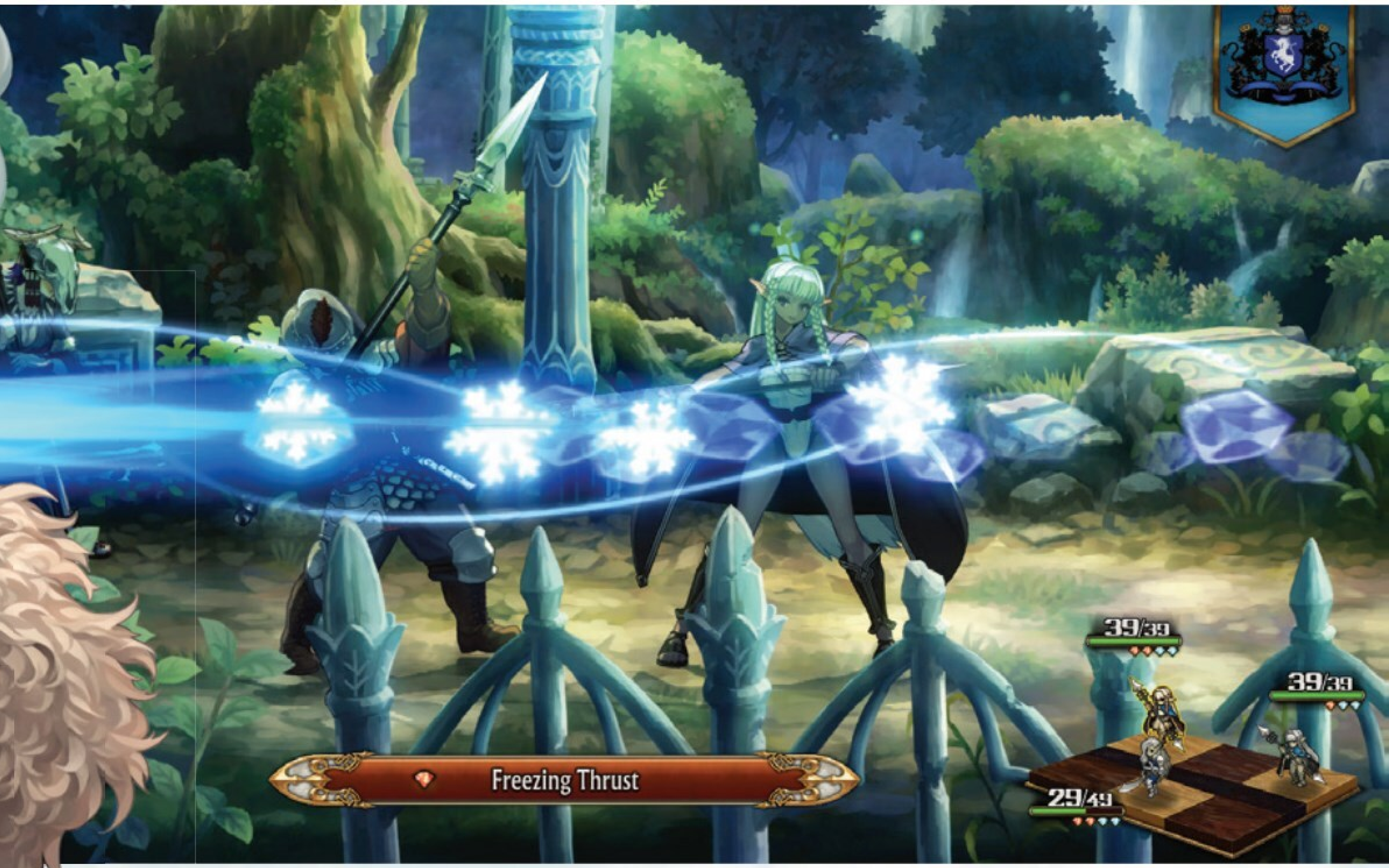


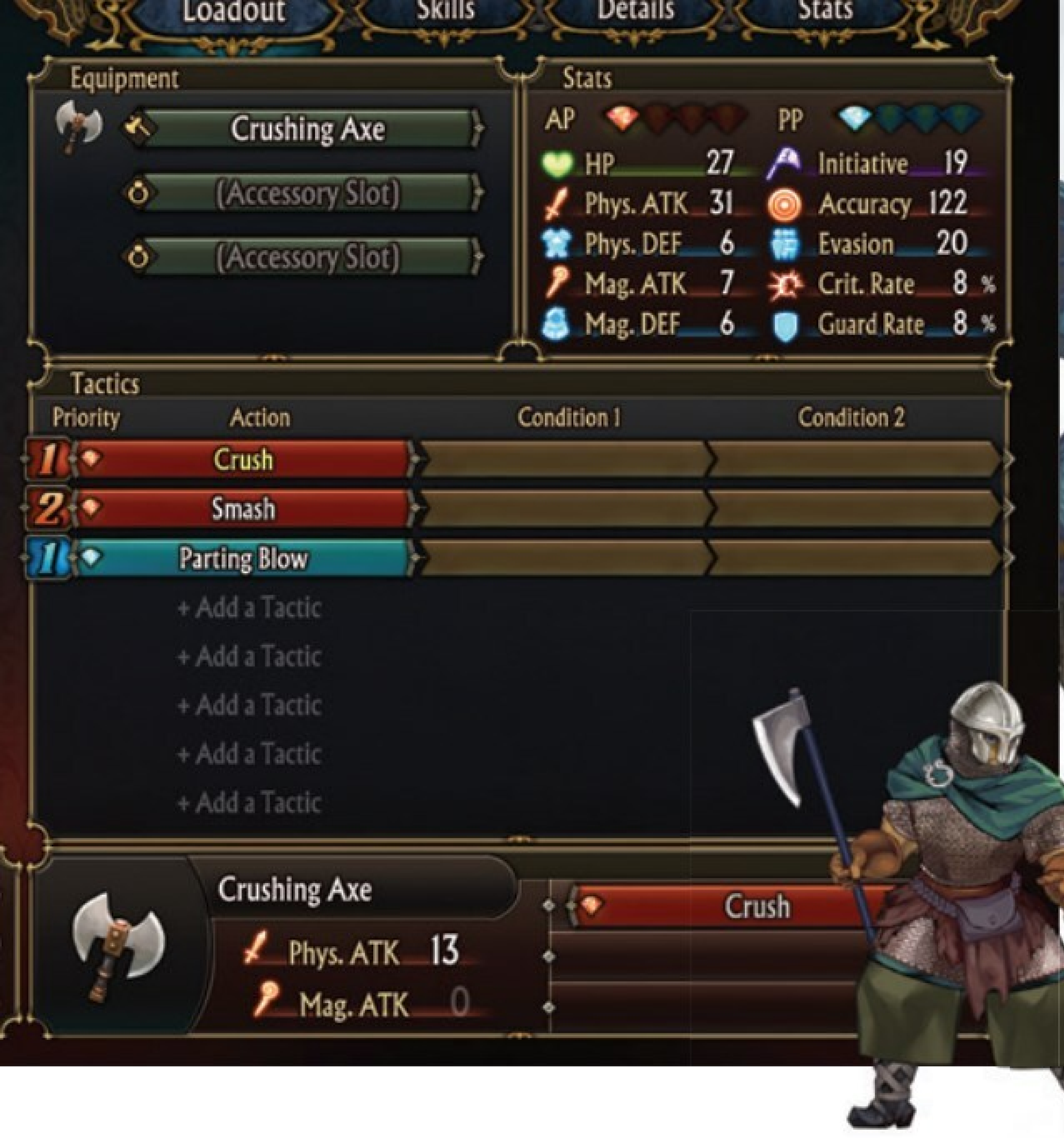
"[It] was not a change of genre, but rather a team effort to create a worldview that was originally based on the premise of a fantasy," lead game designer Wataru Nakanishi tells me over email after I watch roughly an hour of live Unicorn Overlord gameplay. Notably, the game isn't a response to the sci-fi modern action of 13 Sentinels as I expected; the team wanted to make another fantasy game, which checks out considering that's where its roots lie, dating back to its debut game, 2007's GrimGrimoire. Looking at Vanillaware's history, it's 13 Sentinels that stands out as the oddball fit, with most of the studio's games falling into the fantasy camp.

Nakanishi says Unicorn Overlord is Vanillaware's spin on the tactical fantasy RPG, and that's immediately clear in the opening hour. Protagonist Alain is around 10 years old in the prologue, when he and the Queen of Cornia, Ilenia, witness a rebellion at the hands of one of her trusted generals. Worried about the kingdom's fate and bloodline, her most trusted knight, Josef, is tasked with spiriting the prince away to safety. The main game's story picks up 10 years later; Crown Prince Alain is around 20 years old, living on the island of Palevia, where he's grown up since the rebellion. While sparring with his friend Lex, a ship flying Zenoiran colors sails into the harbor and it's clear they mean no good.

Immediately, I'm in love with the score, which oscillates between medieval choruses and an orchestral mix of horns, winds, and other instruments typical of the genre. Nakanishi tells me the independent music group Basiscape, who scored 13 Sentinels under the direction of composer Hitoshi Sakimoto, is returning to create the musical soundscape of Unicorn Overlord, this time under Mitsuhiro Kaneda, who also worked on 13 Sentinels' score. Nakanishi says Kaneda's score has a "newness that befits the name, 'Rebirth of tactical fantasy RPGs,'" which is something the team mentions various times when discussing the game. The statement is a bold one and, taken at face value, almost arrogant. But Nakanishi clears it up humbly.

"[That statement] reflects the fact that this is a challenging title created in the tactical RPG genre,





Equipment

Crushing Axe
(Accessory Slot)
(Accessory Slot)

Stats

AP
PP

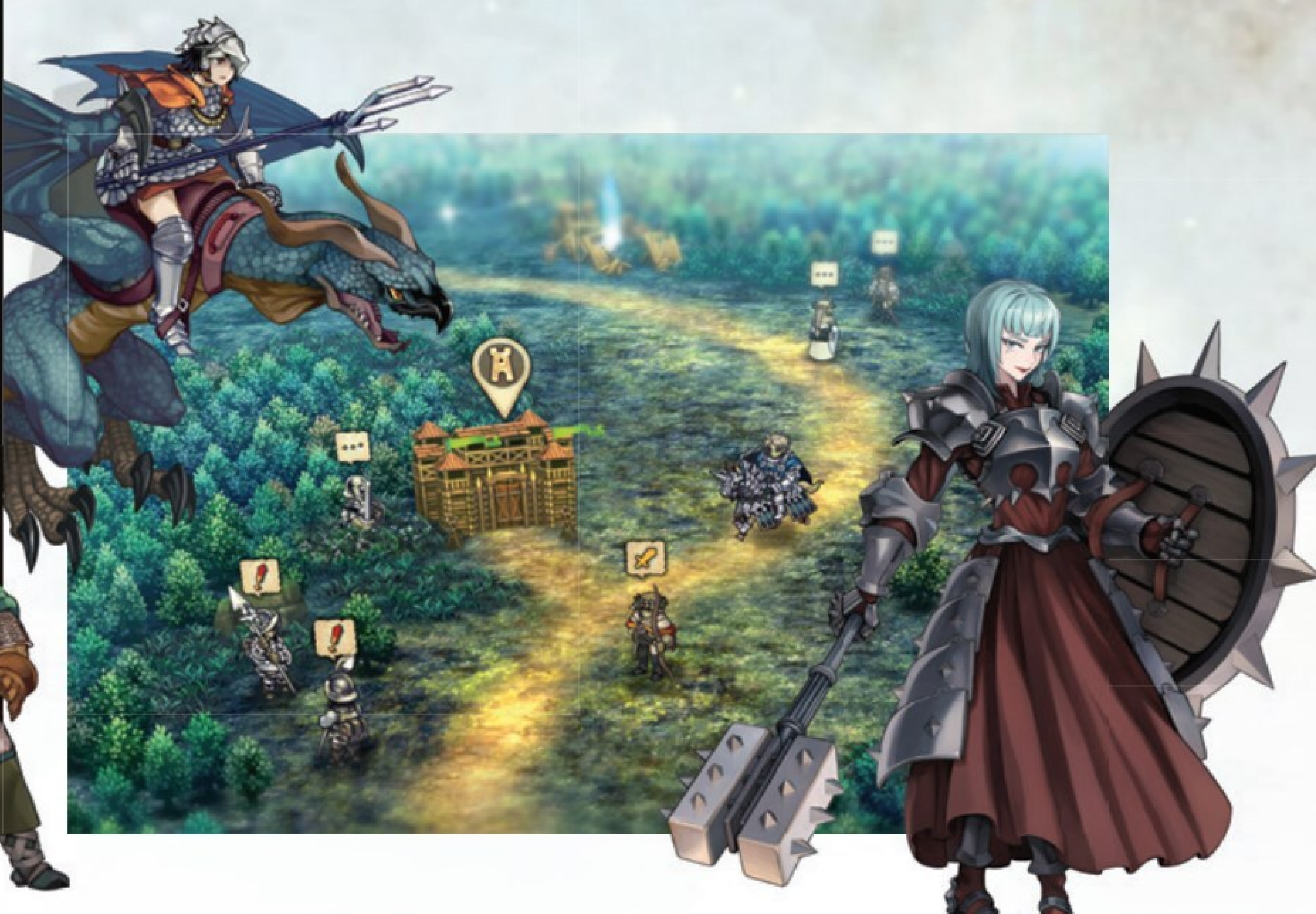
HP	27	Initiative	19
Phys. ATK	31	Accuracy	122
Phys. DEF	6	Evasion	20
Mag. ATK	7	Crit. Rate	8 %
Mag. DEF	6	Guard Rate	8 %

Tactics

Priority	Action	Condition 1	Condition 2
1	Crush		
2	Smash		
1	Parting Blow		

+ Add a Tactic
+ Add a Tactic
+ Add a Tactic
+ Add a Tactic
+ Add a Tactic

Crushing Axe
Phys. ATK 13
Mag. ATK 0
Crush



which we have always loved, with new challenges, and that we want to convey this to our players in a straightforward and correct manner," he says. "We are making various efforts to make the game accessible to people who have never played this genre before."

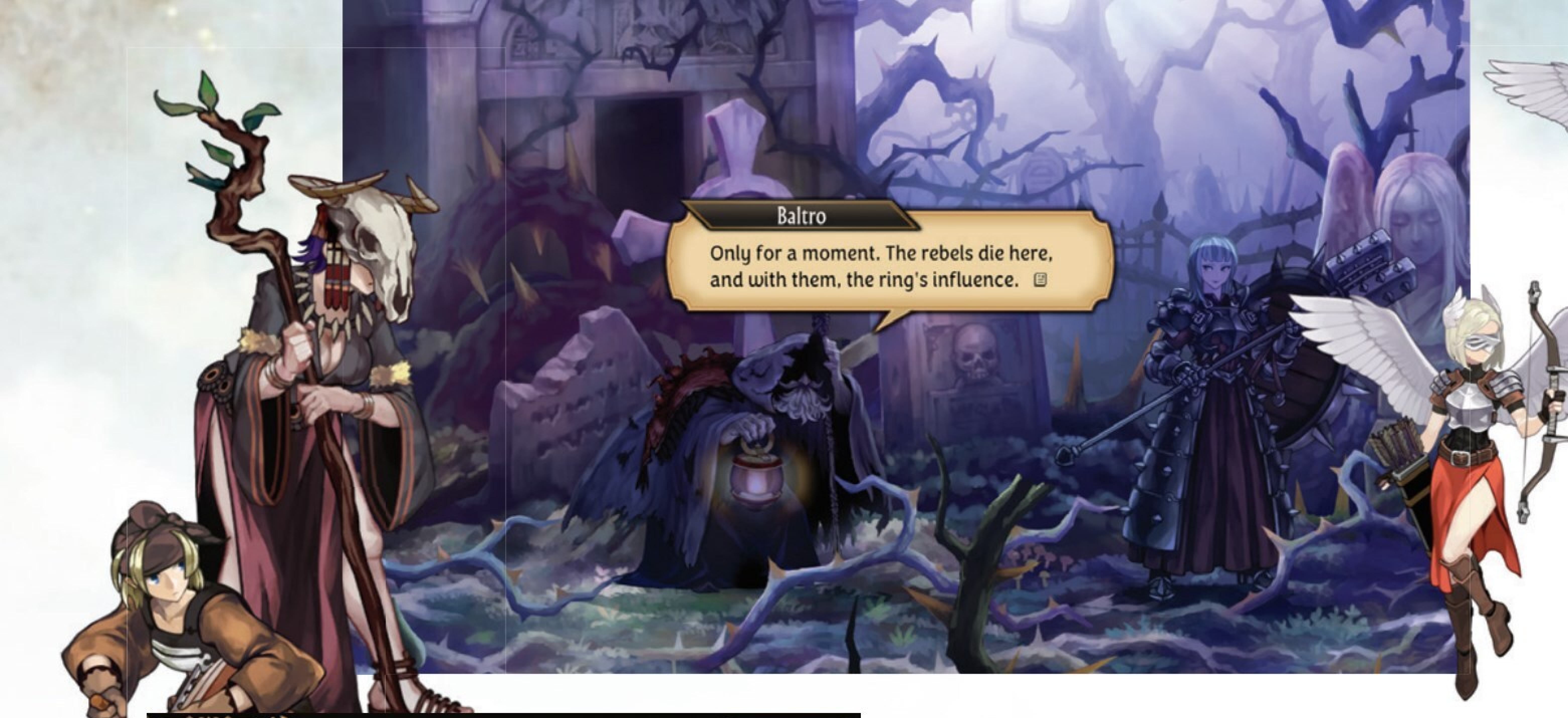
After my hour of gameplay, that's a somewhat tall order. The genre is historically one of the more complex to get into, and my initial impression of Unicorn Overlord is that newcomers might find it overwhelming, perhaps even odd at first. You don't necessarily control the individual fights that happen in combat encounters – instead, you determine where you want to move on the "tactical battle map." Bumping into an enemy makes battle inevitable, but before said battle takes place, you can essentially look into the future to see how it plays out by checking unit formation, which skills they have set up, and more.

After all checks are in place, and after checking with a statistic measure that tells you how they might fair in battle in a Fire Emblem-esque way, the battle begins; you do not participate but instead, watch what happens. Success comes from active skills, which use points regenerated between skirmishes, and passive skills, which trigger in combat when certain conditions are met. For example, one passive skill I see heals a unit's character at the end of a battle, a critical tool as health does not regenerate between bouts.

Back on the beautifully illustrated tactical battle map, I watch a complete battle stage, which features its own win-loss conditions, play out. The player first interacts with the Command Post, where they deploy units based on Valor points they have available to spend. Vanillaware tells me liberating towns and fortresses and defeating enemies earns more of these. You can also spend these points on special Valor Skills, which apply unique buffs inside and outside combat. From here, Unicorn Overlord plays almost like a board game, where you must tactically place your various units on the map – each comprised of different characters and companions with their own use case – and move them accordingly.

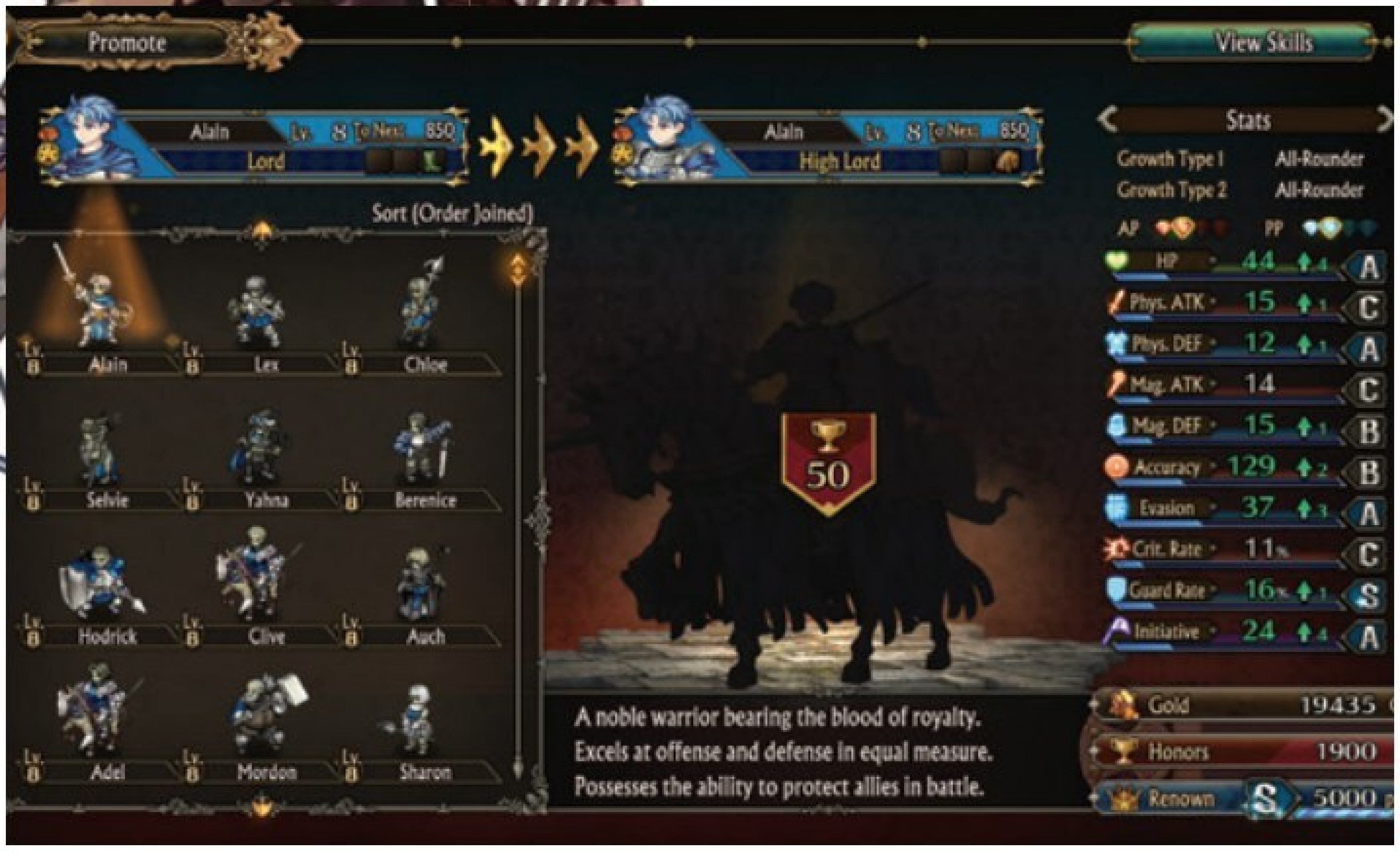
Admittedly, it's all quite confusing as I'm thrown directly hands-off into the mix, but I do witness many tutorial messages and screens we skip over for the sake of time. Nakanishi assures me Unicorn Overlord features a lot of in-game support, including "tutorials, recommended composition examples, automatic equipment, strategy settings, and switching difficulty levels so that as many people as possible can enjoy the most exciting parts of the game [...] without becoming overwhelmed."

Lightning Blade



Baltro

Only for a moment. The rebels die here, and with them, the ring's influence.



Alain Lv. 8 To Next 850 Lord

Alain Lv. 8 To Next 850 High Lord

Stats

Growth Type 1 All-Rounder

Growth Type 2 All-Rounder

AP PP

HP 44 ↑4 A

Phys. ATK 15 ↑1 C

Phys. DEF 12 ↑1 A

Mag. ATK 14 C

Mag. DEF 15 ↑1 B

Accuracy 129 ↑2 B

Evasion 37 ↑3 A

Crit. Rate 11% C

Guard Rate 16% ↑1 S

Initiative 24 ↑4 A

A noble warrior bearing the blood of royalty. Excels at offense and defense in equal measure. Possesses the ability to protect allies in battle.

Gold 19435

Honors 1900

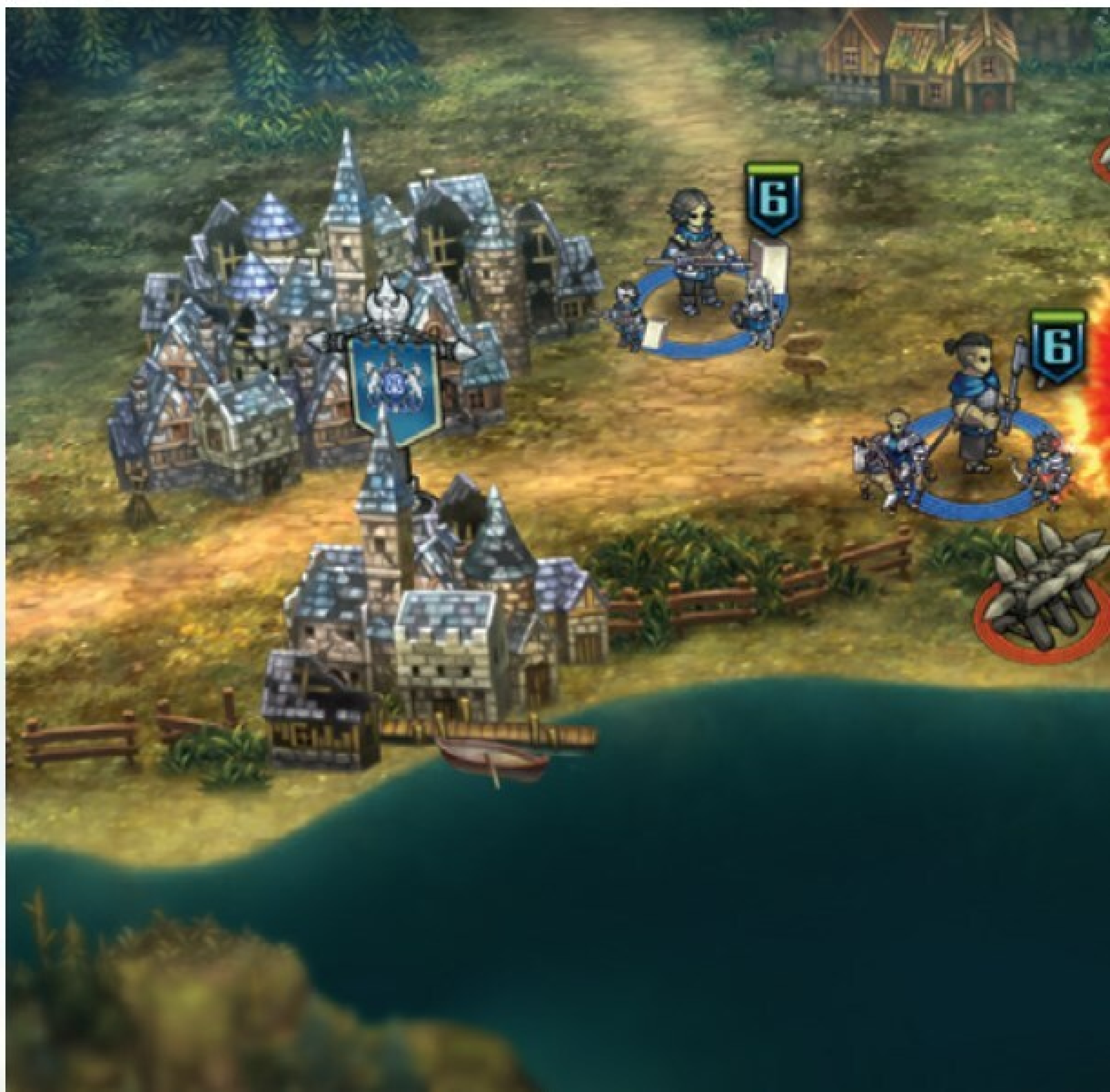
Renown S 5000

Once an encounter begins, either by your own unit running into an enemy or vice versa, an initiative order determines when combatants attack, and the entire battle continues until the enemy (or you) are defeated or all combatants run out of action points. In the latter scenario, the side with the most health remaining claims victory. The more of it I see, the more I appreciate its cinematic approach – I, the player, set the pieces onto the board and then watch the strategic planning (or chaos) pay off, hopefully in a win. Nakanishi says the draw of this type of gameplay is immersion.

“[In] the case of tactical RPGs, the combination of a strategy element, in which you have a bird’s eye view of the battlefield and make precise, step-by-step moves, and the role-playing element, in which you become attached to the characters living in the world and fight alongside them, is a game genre that offers the greatest sense of immersion,” he says. “This is the main attraction, and the team places great importance on this kind of game experience.”

After a few fights in this preliminary stage early in the game’s opening hours, we liberate a Palevian town under Zenoira, switching it from a red flag to our blue flag, picking up two Valor points in the process. This newly liberated town is now a base from which we can deploy units. We advance through the stage, using Josef to cover extra ground as movement takes place in real time, and he moves the fastest, while swapping allies in and out of various units once two units are within the radius of a special green circle on the tactical battle map. Vanillaware says it’s essential to take advantage of this feature, as damaged allies might need to fall back while more adept ones, like a companion that uses magic (or magick as it’s called in the game), or another with high stamina indicated by the number on an on-screen shield, head to the front of a unit’s pack.

Within each unit is a player-created makeup of classes, too, which might determine how you advance them on the tactical battle map. Horseback cavalry are excellent against Infantry, a standard soldier, as are Knights. With their great shield, Hoplite classes



Diving Thrust

offer high defense. They are suitable for protecting an area or unit, so countering with a high agility class is extra important when facing one.

Outside of fights, players can use items to heal or buff companions, change a loadout and equipment, and more. And all of this – the combat of Unicorn Overlord – is just one half of the experience, with the other being exploration.

"On the overworld, big goals are always clearly presented, and players decide on their own how to achieve them," Nakanishi says. "Facilities such as towns and forts around the world are controlled by the main enemy called the New Zenoiran Empire, and while exploring the overworld, you can recruit allies, procure equipment and items, and make preparations while liberating towns. Various quests and events will occur along the way, but it is up to the player to decide in what order and how to complete them, so depending on the situation of the troops [...], you may sometimes have to avoid them or postpone them."

On that note, Vanillaware expects players to roll credits at 50 hours, but completionists can expect upwards of 100.

I'm not entirely sold on the combat and exploration, but that's because I haven't yet played it for myself. It looks interesting from a mechanical standpoint, and it's certainly unique. If Vanillaware has made one thing clear in its portfolio, it's that the studio has little regard for trends; it marches to the beat of its own drum within familiar genres, even if they're niche.

"Games that we find interesting from the bottom of our hearts tend to be from genres that are considered niche," Nakanishi says. "So rather than intentionally choosing those genres, it's because we just happen to like them. However, no matter the genre, it is meaningless if the customers who purchase it cannot find it interesting, so we always focus on ensuring the game we're producing is understandable and enjoyable to play."

Niche or not, Unicorn Overlord is a treat for the eyes. Classic SNES RPGs of yesteryear inspire Vanillaware this time around, Nakanishi tells me, and the studio wants Unicorn Overlord to look like one of those games but on a modern platform, complete with a full suite of English or Japanese voice over. The art design, born from a single piece of concept art (see opening spread), is meant to evoke that period's games, somewhere between retro and painterly. That piece of art is also the game's title screen. "Based on this illustration, the character designs for battle were decided, battle backgrounds were drawn, and the overall art style came together," he adds.

All of this only scratches the surface of what I saw in that first hour of Unicorn Overlord gameplay. There's plenty of story crammed into it – a story not worth spoiling here since the narrative is a big draw for many Vanillaware fans – and an intense number of menus RPG fans will surely love digging into the minutiae of. There are more than 60 companions to recruit freely throughout the campaign, depending on how you tackle the game's more open nature of progression, and lots of great music and visuals to accompany it if what I've already heard and seen is any indication. In short, there's still a lot of game to uncover in Unicorn Overlord, and even after an hour and a lengthy interview, it feels as if I've barely wrapped my head around this tactical fantasy RPG experience. With little time to go until its release next month, I'm excited to see what Vanillaware can do with its return to the fantasy genre, where its history began almost two decades ago. ■

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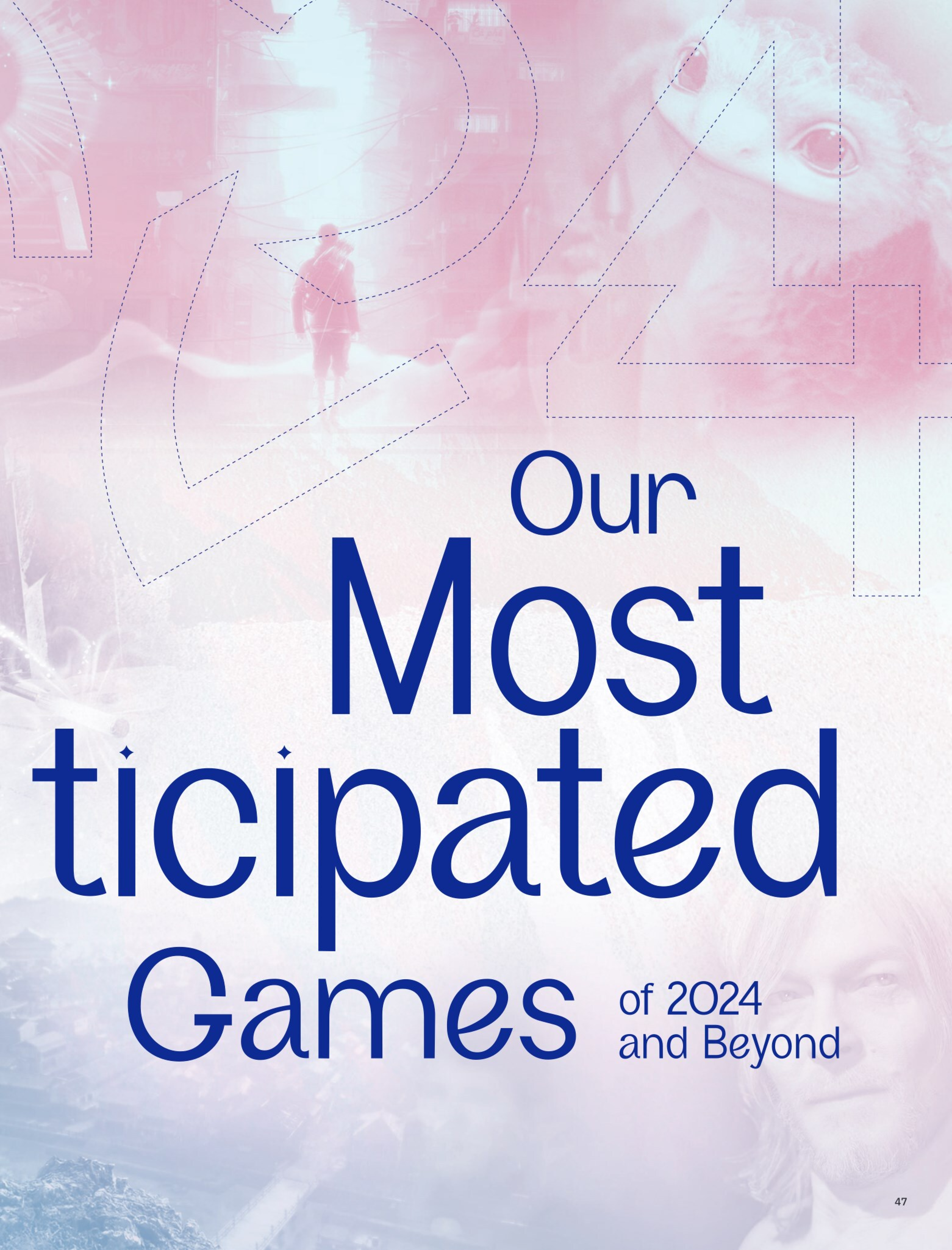


Our Most ticipated Games of 2024 and Beyond

The excellent year for game releases, which was 2023, is now behind us. And despite spending those months on arguably some of the best games ever made, we can't wait to look ahead to what's next. Our list, which admittedly does not cover *everything* we're excited about, contains worlds we're excited to revisit with sequels, brand-new experiences where we don't know what to expect, and of course, Grand Theft Auto VI, a game that we can finally, fully confirm will exist at some point in the future.

Avowed

Skyrim competition

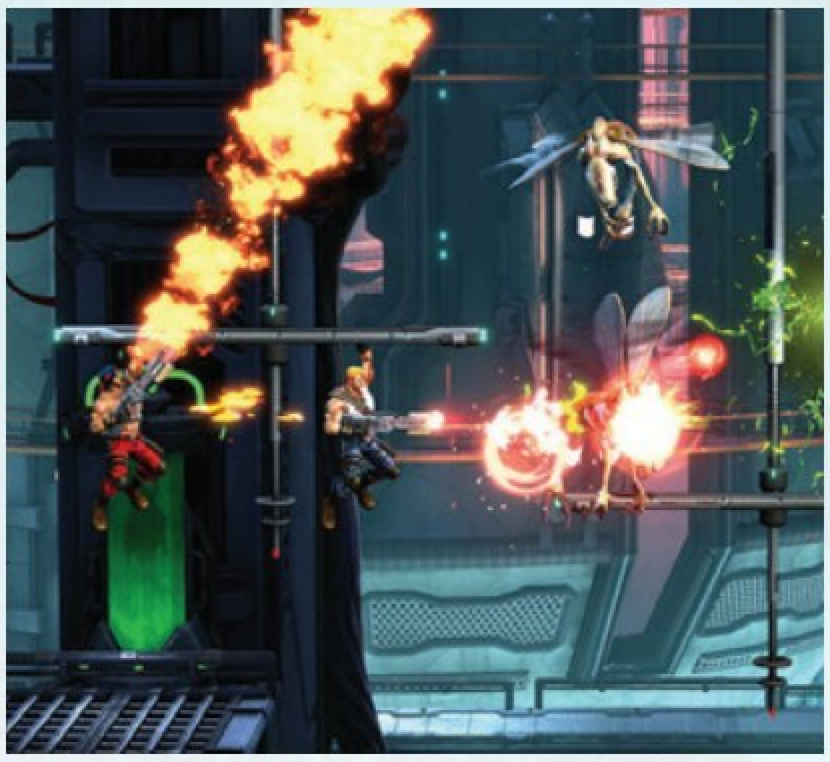
Obsidian has been honing its RPG-building skills for decades, and that's not the only reason I'm excited about what Avowed seems to be promising. Drawing immediate comparisons to the first-person fantasy gameplay of titles like The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, early glimpses of the project in action suggest a grand and combat-focused adventure.

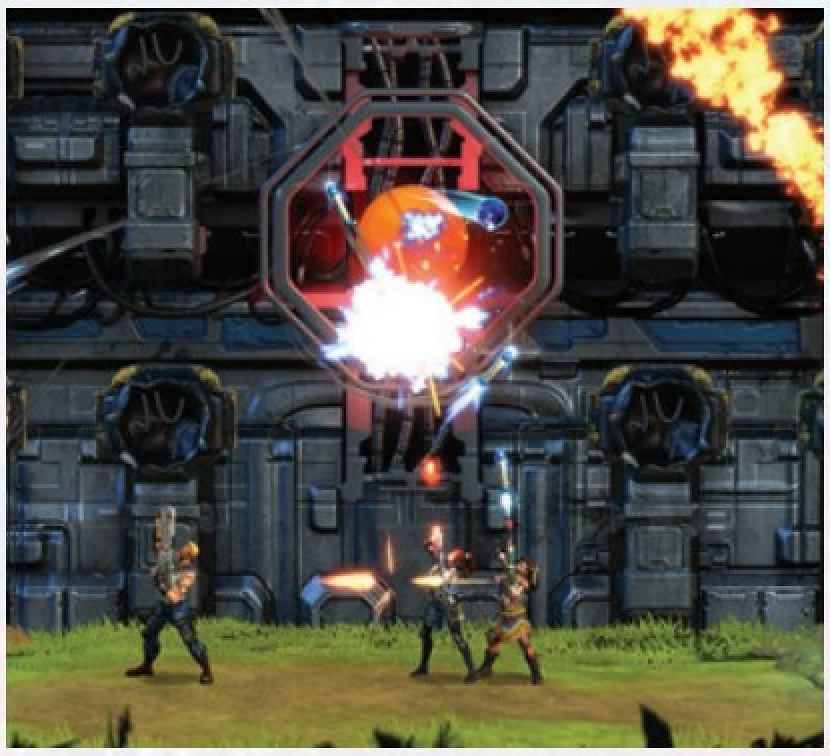
While the playstyle is new, the worldbuilding has been firmly established in Obsidian's earlier Pillars of Eternity games, in which the world of Eora has been firmly realized. That means we can expect more of the D&D-inspired mix of interesting character races, political conflicts, and monsters, albeit in a new corner of the world.

Avowed transports players to an area called the Living Lands, a distant northern area filled with numerous valleys surrounded by towering mountains. Players use a mix of medieval melee weapons, ranged weapons (including firearms), and magic to take on the array of skeletons, giant spiders, and bears we've seen in early footage, all in pursuit of addressing a mysterious plague that has overtaken the area.

Obsidian's work on titles like The Outer Worlds, Pentiment, and Grounded in recent years have all impressed me; fellow RPG fans would be wise to keep a close eye on Avowed as it steers toward a 2024 release. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Microsoft Game Studios **DEVELOPER** Obsidian Entertainment **RELEASE** Fall 2024





Contra: Operation Galuga

A hardcore uprising

The years have not been kind to Contra. For the last decade, the franchise has languished on the sidelines save for 2019's critically panned Contra: Rogue Corps. With that game's failure, Konami is taking Contra back to its run-and-gun roots with a modernized reimagining of the original NES game that, hopefully, will get the franchise back on track.

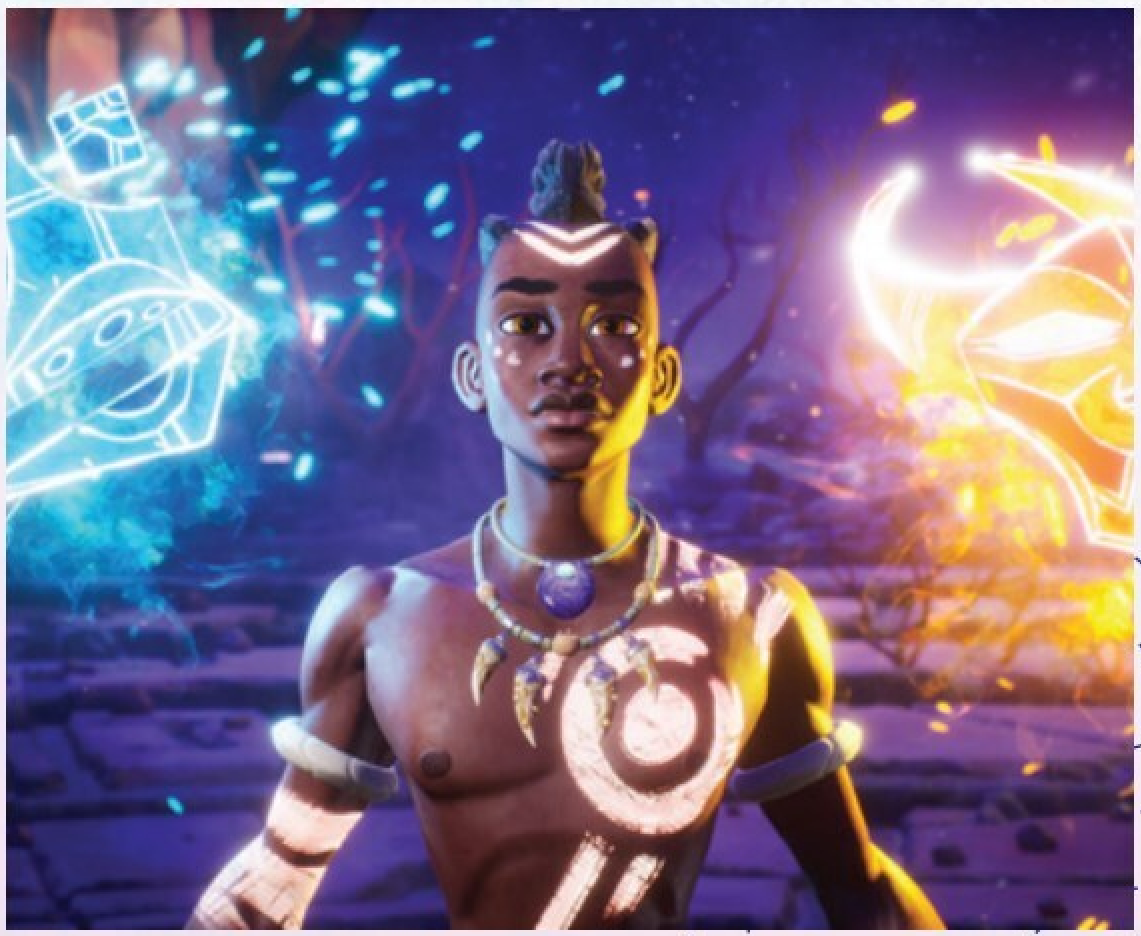
Contra: Operation Galuga boasts six playable characters with distinct abilities, including mainstays Bill Rizer and Lance Bean. A story mode lets up to two players mow down enemies together, but an arcade mode supports four players for what's likely to be absolute retro-fueled chaos. If that's not enough Contra for you, a challenge mode offers 30 missions with special stipulations.

Approachability additions such as multiple difficulty options may save me from punching in the Konami code until my fingers blister. While all of that inspires a degree of confidence, what puts me more at ease is that WayForward is bringing the game to life. The studio behind retro revivals like Advance Wars 1+2 Reboot Camp, Double Dragon Neon, and the Shantae games has a knack for revitalizing dormant classic franchises for the better. Here's hoping it works its magic with Contra. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

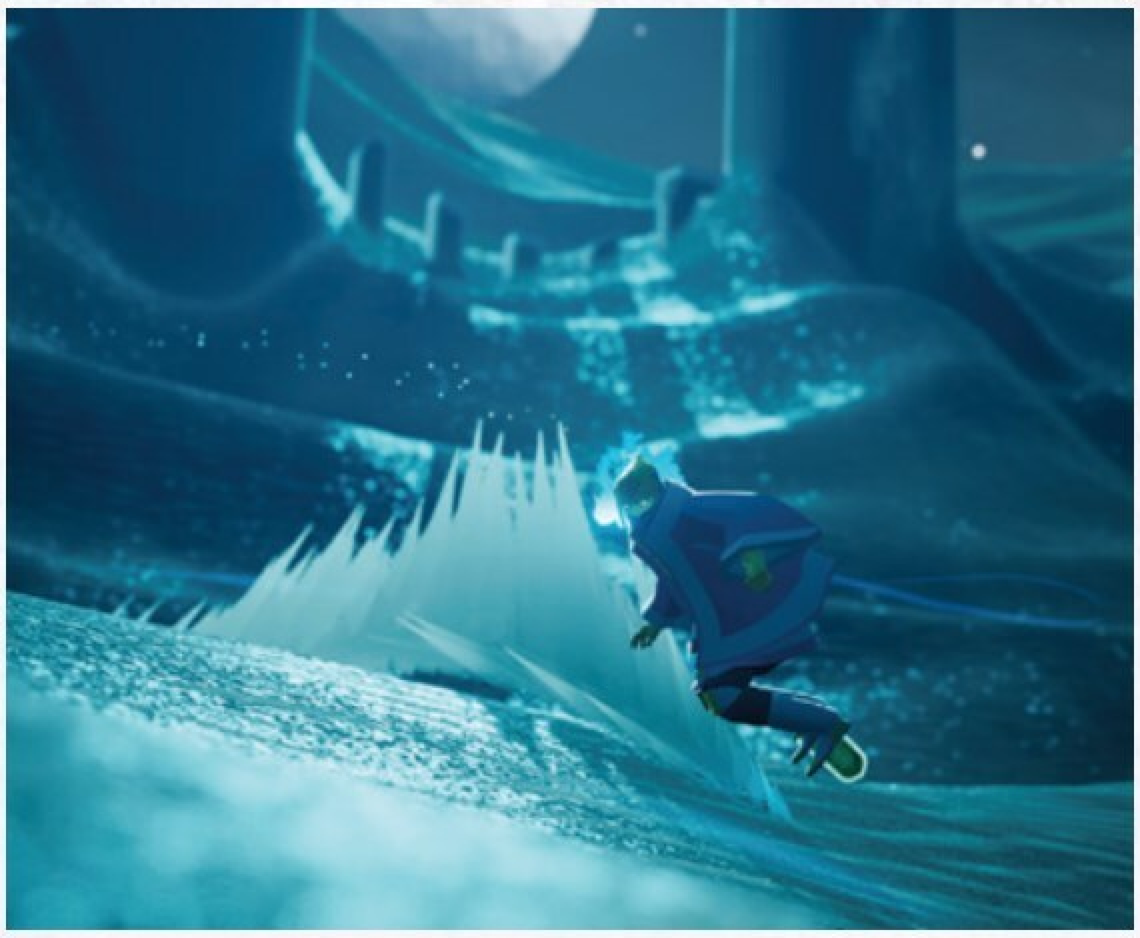
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Action
PUBLISHER Konami **DEVELOPER** WayForward Technologies **RELEASE** 2024

Tales of Kenzera: Zau

Inspired by Bantu myth, Tales of Kenzera: Zau is the debut game from Surgent Studios. According to founder Abubakar Salim (who also voices the protagonist), it tells a tale of grief as a boy tries to bargain with the god of Death to get his father back. With bright colors and fast-paced combat, this Metroidvania is one we've got our eye on. **BY CHARLES HARTE**



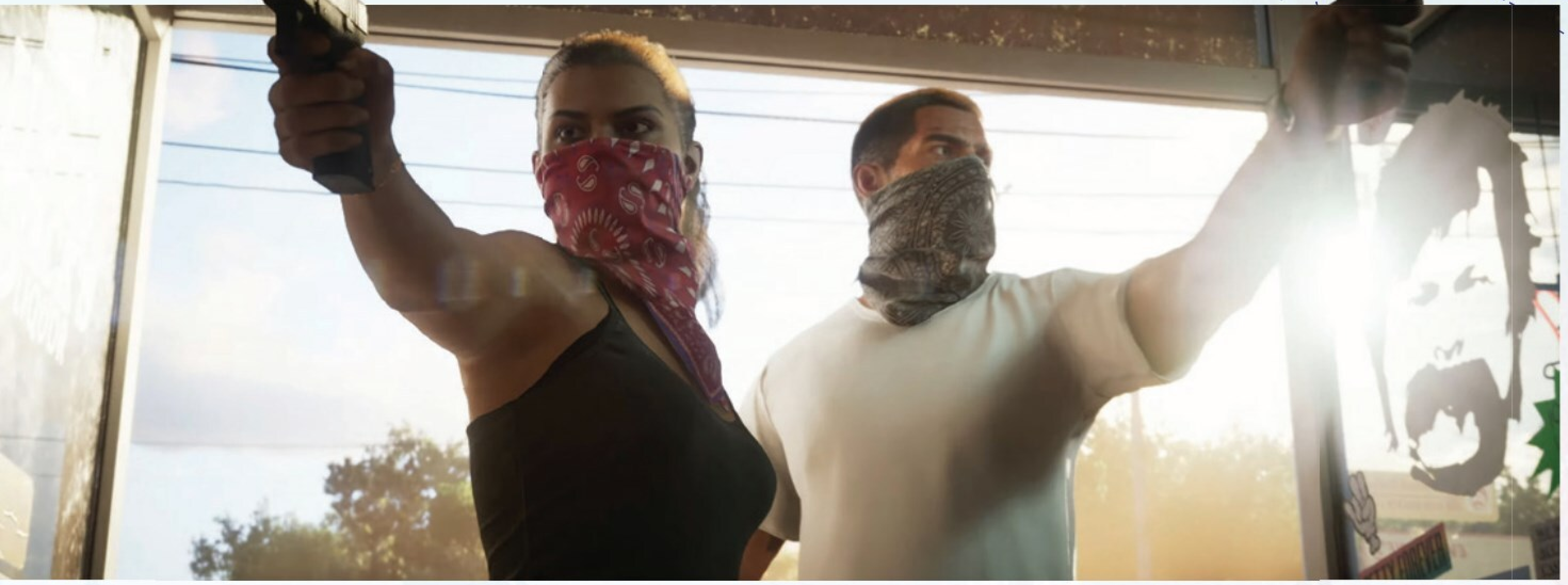
Sword of the Sea

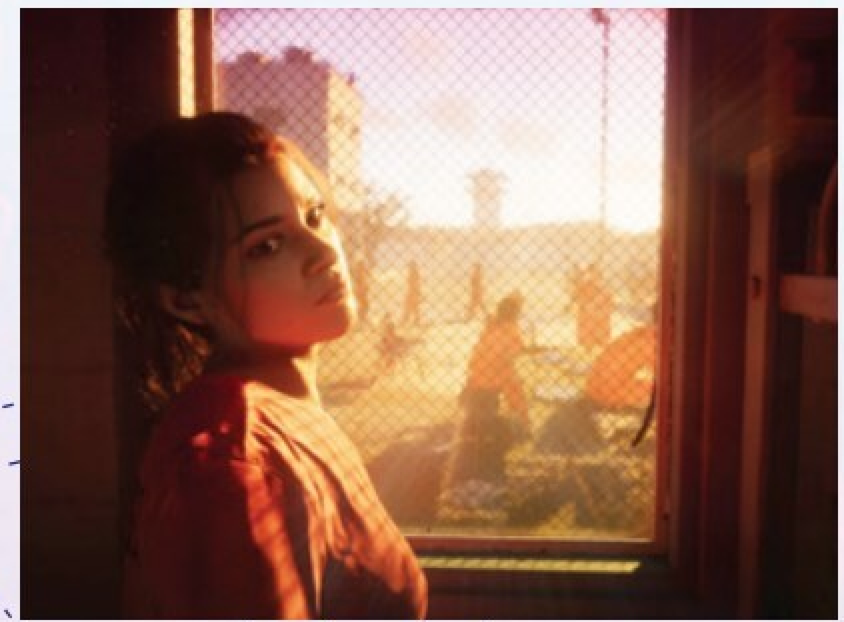


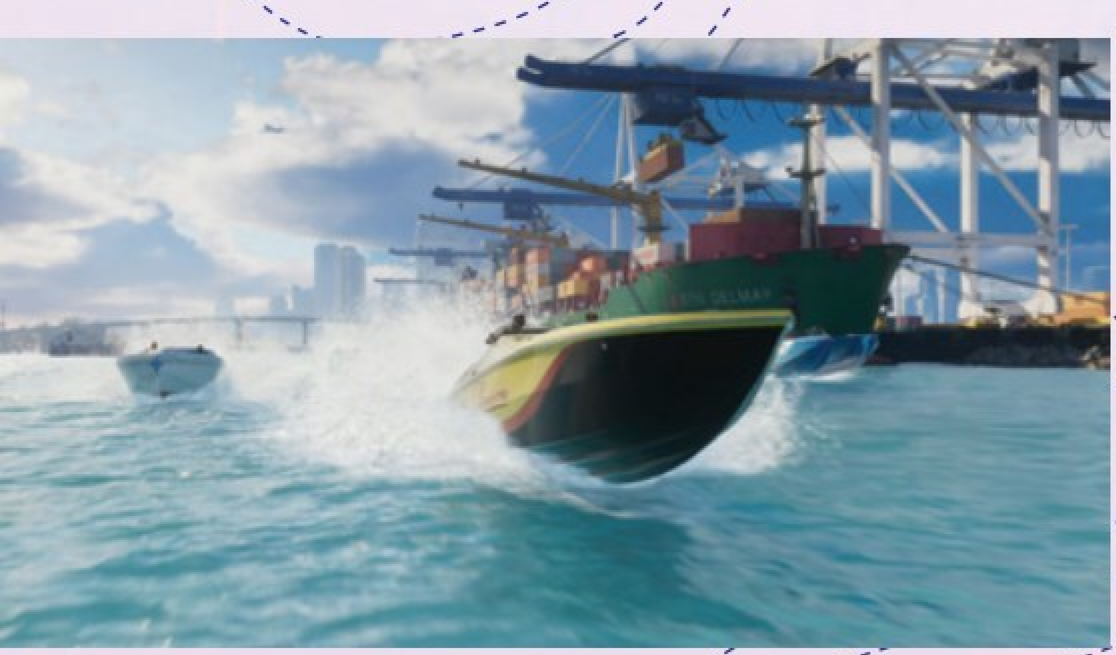
Imagine playing Journey, but you snowboarded across the desert. Also, that board is a big sword. Giant Squid, the makers of The Pathless and Abzu, are bringing this fantasy to life, and it looks as visually stunning as you'd expect. The high-speed traversal looks like a blast, as does uncovering ancient mysteries hidden beneath the dunes. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

Grand Theft Auto VI

Welcome to Leonida





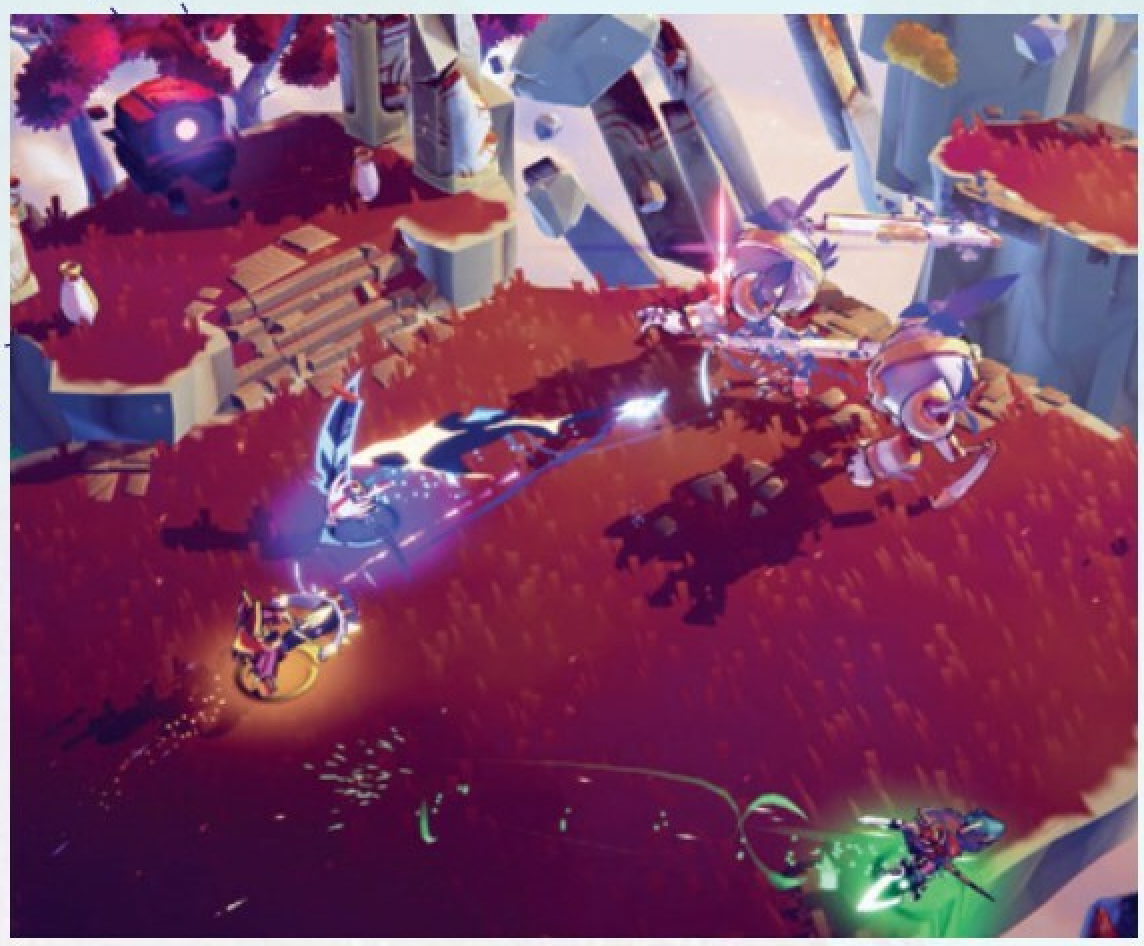


After a decade, Grand Theft Auto is finally getting a proper, new numbered entry. Years of speculation coupled with a colossal leak of gameplay footage and assets for the game in 2022 have made fans exceptionally eager to do crime in a new city, and though our first official look at the game was brief, it offered all kinds of tantalizing details. We now know the game follows the criminal duo Lucia and her not-yet-officially-named male partner. We also know the game takes place in Leonida, based on our real-world Florida, which features Vice City, based on our real-world Miami.

Alongside impressive visuals shown in the game's debut trailer, we learned Lucia, presumably, begins the game re-entering society after a stint in jail. TikTok-inspired social media also looks like it will play a major role, with the trailer featuring a montage of bizarre events like alligators in pools and entering convenience stores, people dancing on top of moving cars, and – as is typical with the Grand Theft Auto games – a collection of quirky characters. Despite the already extended wait, we still have quite a long time to go before revisiting Vice City, but Rockstar's track record is strong, so we don't mind giving it more time. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S **STYLE** 1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBA) **PUBLISHER** Rockstar Games **DEVELOPER** Rockstar Games **RELEASE** 2025

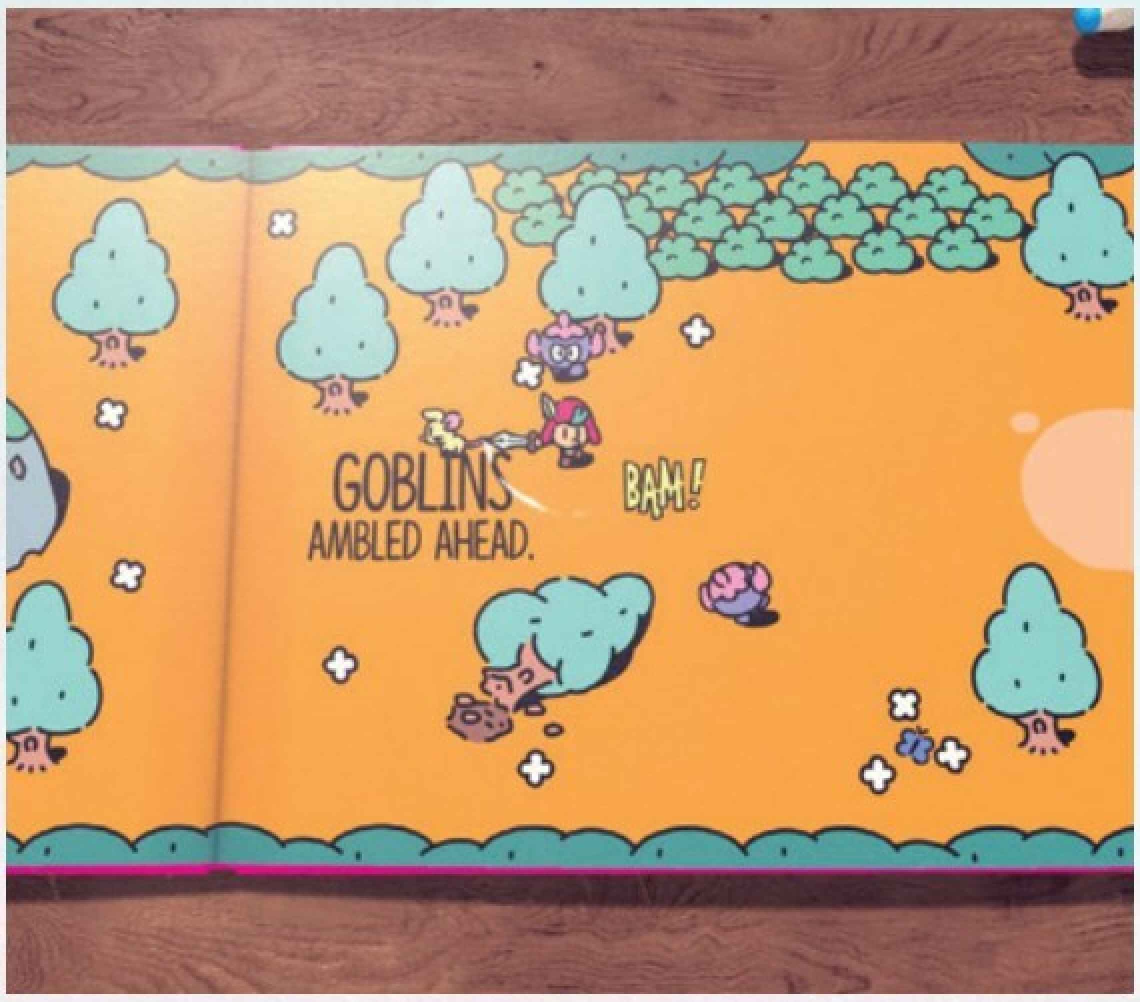
Windblown



Save your floating village (that orbits a black hole) from invaders in Windblown, the next title from the makers of Dead Cells. This roguelite action game lets up to three players join forces to eradicate foes in fast-paced, isometric combat while improving their abilities with new powers and weapons. It hits Steam Early Access this year. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

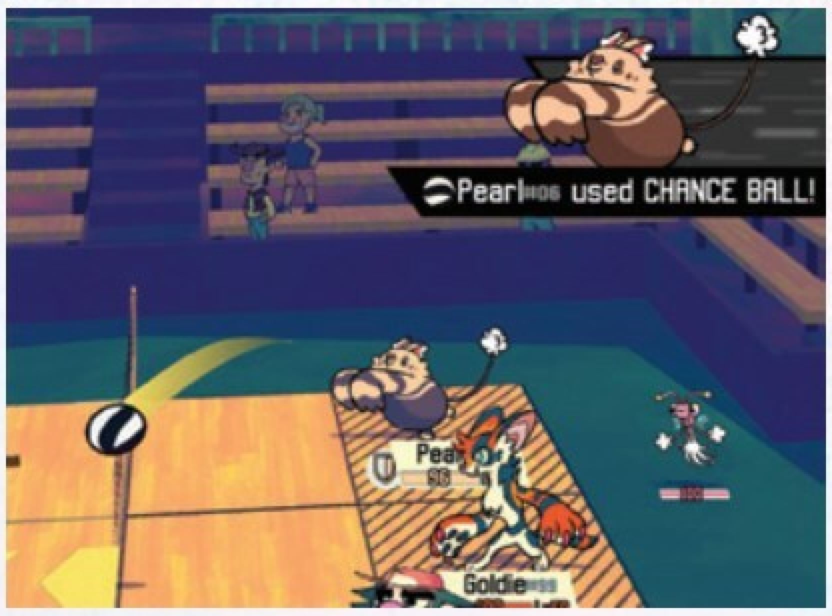
The Plucky Squire

If the entirety of The Plucky Squire was set within the pages of a picture book, I would already be excited, but protagonist Jot quickly learns he can leave the pages of the story, growing into a 3D toy-like figure to explore a child's bedroom. With Zelda-like gameplay and loads of charm, The Plucky Squire looks delightful. **BY CHARLES HARTE**



Beastieball

Gotta catch a ball



We're biologists who study all sorts of cool Beastie stuff...

I'm a lifelong Pokémon fan, but I can't deny the idea of making pets fight has always been a little off-putting. Enter Beastieball: a similar concept, but where monsters (known as Beasties) play a volleyball-like sport together instead. Many developers have put their own spin on Game Freak's classic creature collecting formula, but Beastieball manages to stand out from the pack for a number of reasons. For one, it's slightly more complex than your standard turn-based RPG – Beasties can be knocked out, sure, but the goal isn't to defeat the enemy team; it's to win the game. If you manage to strike an empty lane, you won't do any damage, but you'll score points, and two of those can win you a match, no damage required. Even when facing opponents at a much higher level, there's still hope for victory because of the points system.

This was a crucial moment in the demo the team released earlier this year, which lets you experience the first hour or so for yourself. It also gave me an opportunity to bask in its colorful world and hear some fantastic tracks by composer Lena Raine, known for her work on Celeste and Chicory: A Colorful Tale. While the game won't be out until some vague point this year, I can at least pass the time listening to its great score on SoundCloud. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Klei Publishing **DEVELOPER** Wishes Ultd.
RELEASE 2024

Clockwork Revolution

Reshaping the past to protect the future

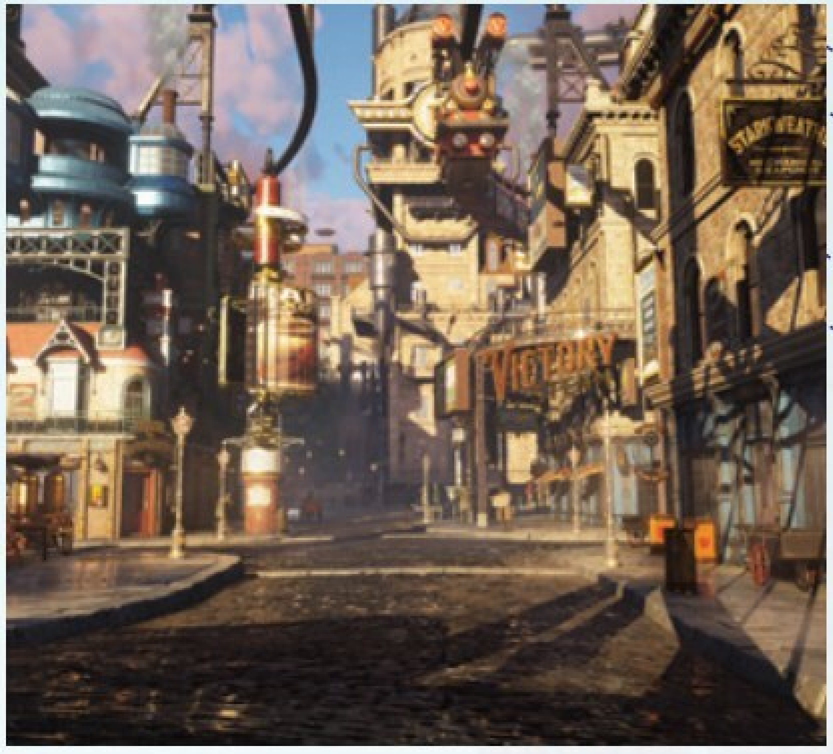
The makers of Wasteland surprised fans with the reveal of its next game, Clockwork Revolution. This first-person action RPG unfolds in the gorgeous steampunk city of Avalon, where the game's heroine resides. The Victorian-era metropolis is a mechanized utopia, but this peaceful facade is revealed to be ill-gotten after the protagonist discovers a time machine that transports her to the past. There, she learns everything about present-day Avalon was purposefully constructed by the villainous Lady Ironwood to suit her own, selfish needs.

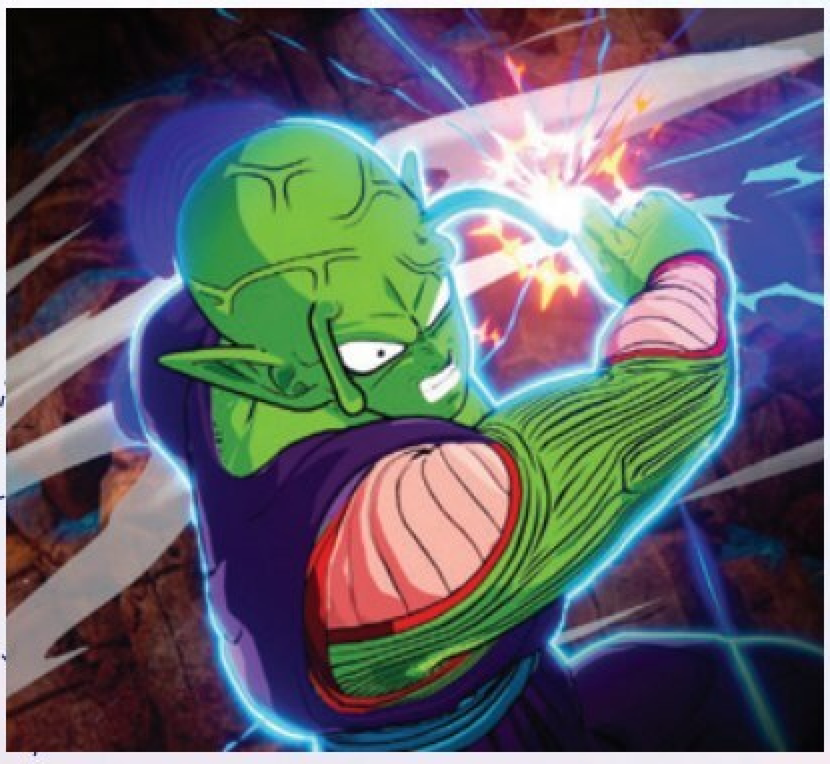
Thus, your mission is to restore Avalon to its true self by traveling back to key moments and undoing Lady Ironwood's tampering. However, like any time travel plot, your meddling will alter Avalon's future in unpredictable ways, both aesthetically and with the people you know. Someone you were friendly with may not be so amiable after you make a well-meaning change. How do you restore Avalon to its "proper" timeline without making things worse?

Clockwork Revolution also packs some impressive-looking combat, with players blasting through robots and humans using an arsenal of steam-powered firearms. You also sport a suite of time manipulation tech, such as the ability to reverse time. If only I could speed up the calendar to play it sooner.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER inXile Entertainment **RELEASE** TBA





Dragon Ball: Sparking Zero

Back to Budokai

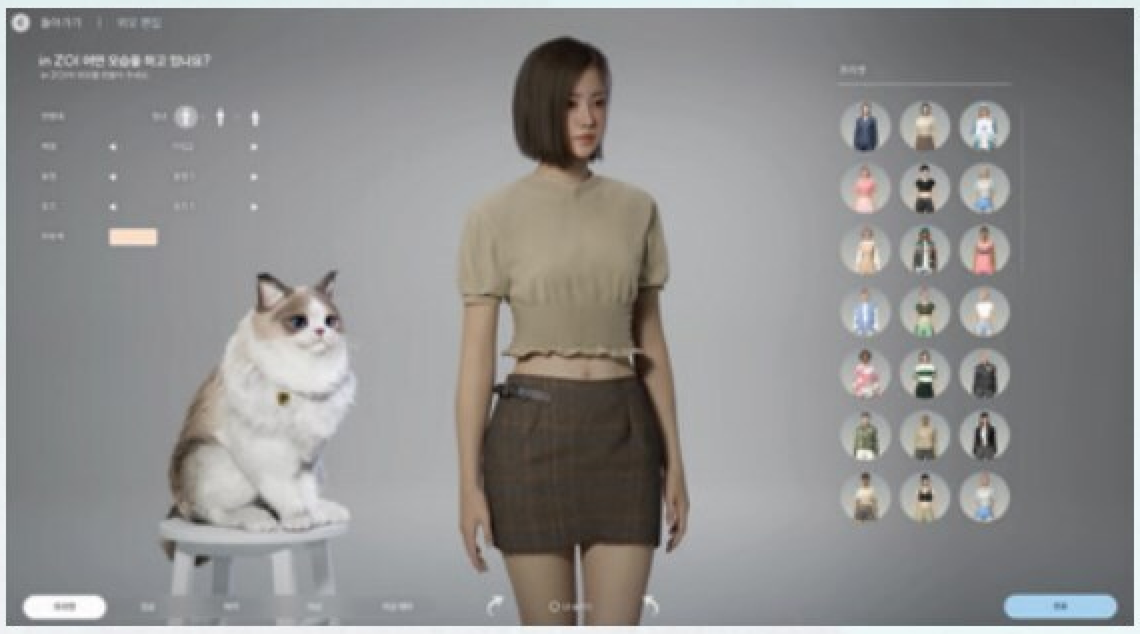
Dragon Ball has become a recurring video game staple, with new releases of some kind nearly every year since 2002's popular fighting game, Dragon Ball Z: Budokai. The series has even made its way into Fortnite with multiple characters and mechanics taken from the manga/anime now existing in Epic's popular battle royale shooter. In the fighting game world, however, the highly successful Dragon Ball FighterZ from developer Arc System Works seemed to put the franchise on a renewed 2D trajectory, which made Dragon Ball Sparking Zero a surprising but welcome announcement.

FighterZ may be Dragon Ball's most recent video game success story, but the Budokai Tenkaichi series, which began in 2005, is arguably still its most popular and fondly remembered take on the property. Sparking is what the Budokai Tenkaichi series was always called in Japan, and Sparking Zero is a 3D fighter like those games. Alongside required appearances by Goku and Vegeta, Sparking Zero also includes Broly (sporting his recent redesign), Frieza, Piccolo, Krillin, Tien, Yamcha, two different versions of Trunks, Android 17 and 18, Cell, Mr. Satan (or Hercule, if you prefer), Buu, and recent characters Bergamo and Jiren. It's safe to assume plenty of others will also appear, as the game's website promises an "incredible number of playable characters." **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 to 2-Player Fighting (Multiplayer TBA) **PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER Spike Chunsoft **RELEASE** TBA

Inzoi

The beautiful life simulator

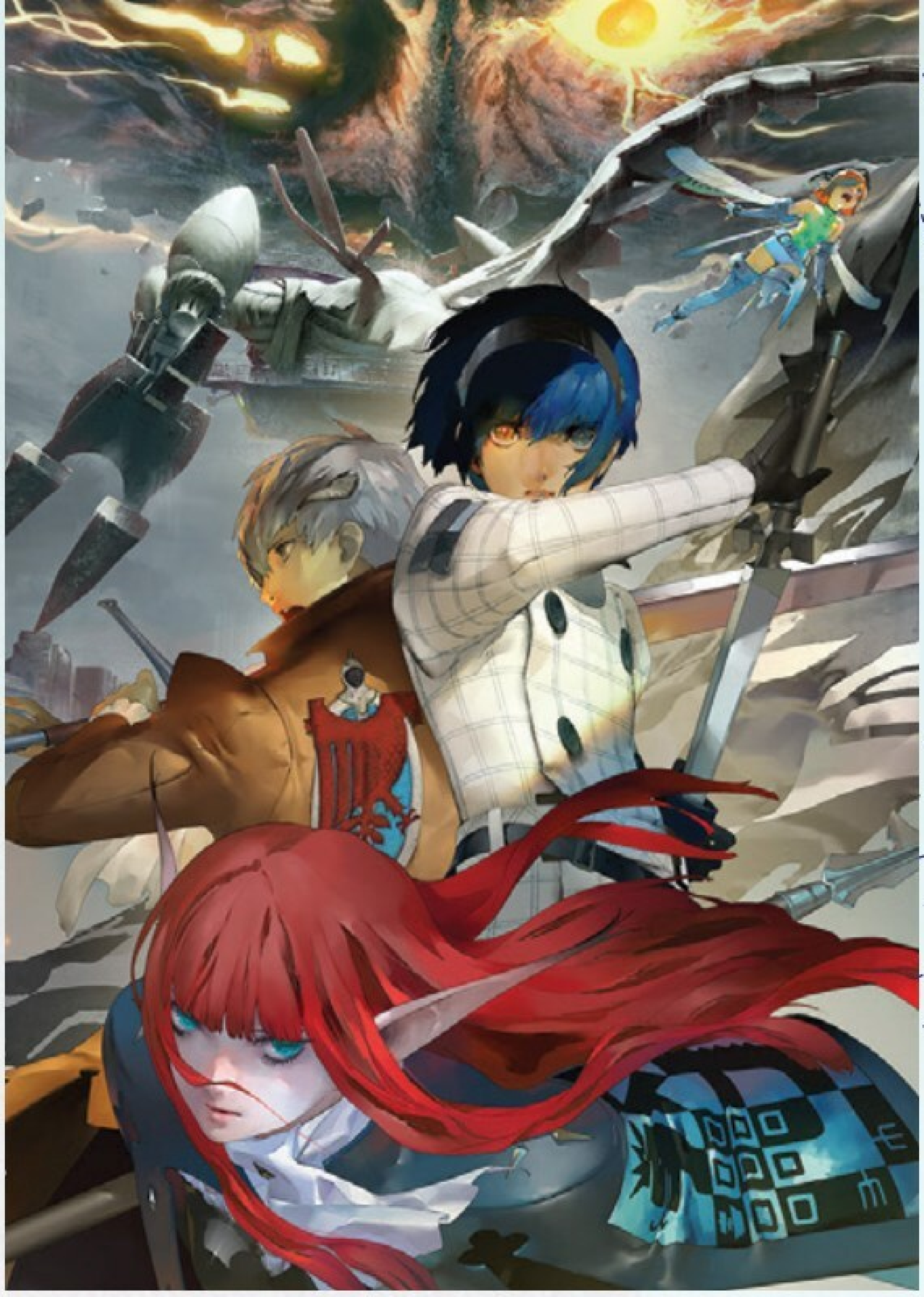


Inzoi is one of those games that we're watching with admitted skepticism. Krafton, the South Korean parent company behind PUBG, is looking to take on The Sims with Inzoi – a style of life simulation game that few have ever attempted to compete with. The game, frankly, looks incredible. It is being developed with Unreal Engine 5 and features, quite possibly, some of the best-looking, most realistic humans ever committed to the medium of video games.

The premise of Inzoi also caught our attention. Rather than being placed in charge of humans for no particular reason, you take on the role of an intern at a godlike company that is overseen by an all-powerful cat. And, with Unreal Engine 5, that mythical cat looks incredible.

The general customization options are in-depth, with seemingly unlimited options to customize your people (or Zois as they are called), their clothes, the homes they live in, and even the furniture. Your powers also extend beyond the humans and homes you create and into the neighborhoods they live in. With Director Mode you will be able to customize the visuals of the streets, the billboards that exist on them, change the weather, and more. Early footage of the game looks a little too-good-to-be-true, but it's about time The Sims had some real competition. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation (Multiplayer TBA)
PUBLISHER Krafton **DEVELOPER** Krafton **RELEASE** 2024



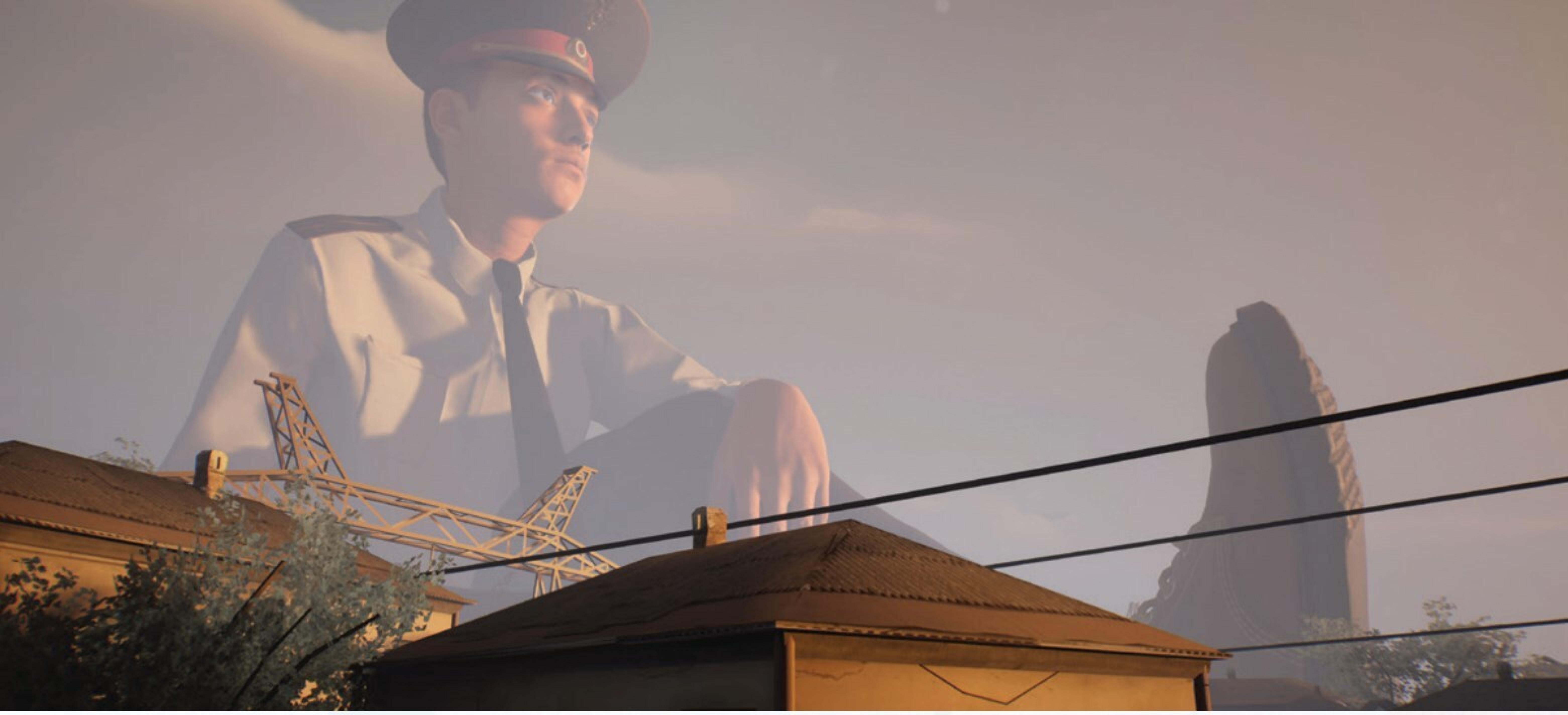
Metaphor: ReFantazio

A fantasy world, Persona-fied

Persona fans have been eating well recently, but it's been a while since we've gotten a taste of anything truly new from the team behind the beloved RPG. In lieu of Persona 6, we're getting Metaphor Re: Fantazio, a game set in a world of high fantasy, swordplay, and giant mechs designed by Ikuto Yamashita, an artist who worked on *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. The trailers speak in vague terms, but it's a world in which a new ruler must be selected, and the protagonist and pals are working together to fight for the throne.

If you're disappointed Studio Zero isn't just making a new entry in their flagship series, you'll be happy to know that Metaphor Re: Fantazio does seem to share many elements with the Persona series. The protagonist forms bonds with other characters and can spend one-on-one time with them doing things like cooking or talking. Gameplay is split between third-person exploration and turn-based combat, though we do see some active sword swinging outside of a turn-based structure. Even the menus evoke the team's past work with flashy UI and text illustrations. Setting comparisons to Persona aside, Metaphor Re: Fantazio's world has really intrigued me. I'm so excited to immerse myself in its setting and get lost in the lore when it comes out this fall. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Atlus **DEVELOPER** Studio Zero **RELEASE** Fall 2024



Militsioner

A tall order

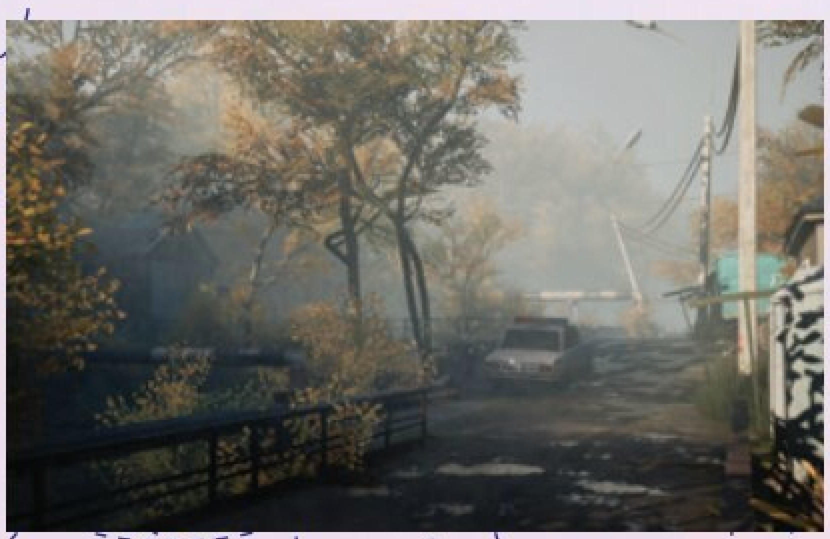
You likely won't find many upcoming games as immediately eye-catching as Militsioner. This surreal first-person adventure drops players into a Russian city kept in check by the watchful gaze of a Godzilla-sized police officer sitting at its center. The bizarre visual of this law-enforcing behemoth hunched over like a child squatting into a city playset is enough to seize my interest, but the moment-to-moment interactions prove just as fascinating.

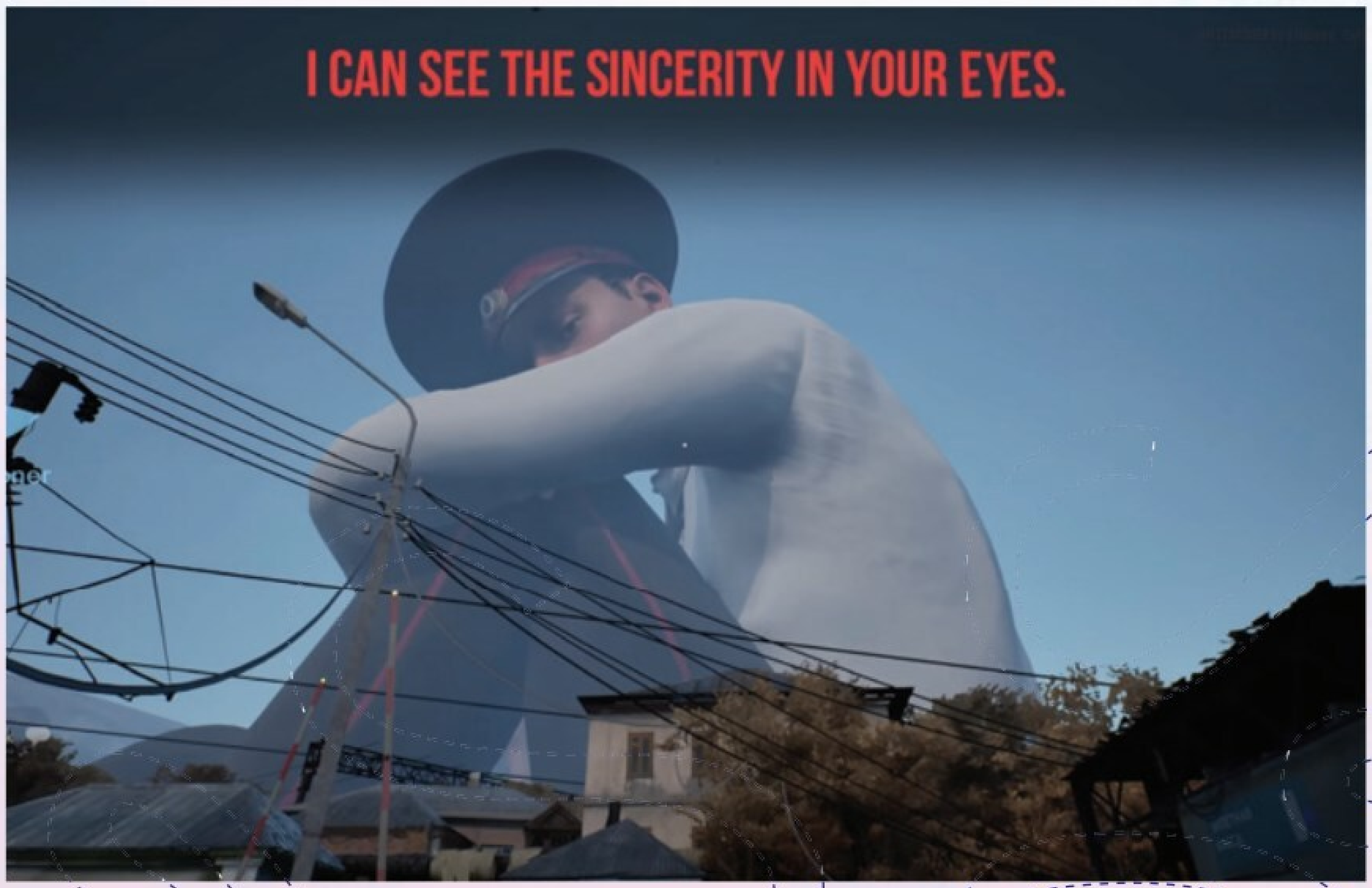
Developer Tallboy describes the policeman as a giant Tamagotchi. You can chat with him, with conversations dictated by his ever-changing mood based on your actions. Break the law by, say, stealing, and he'll become angry and restrict access to certain areas unless you can calm him down by earning his favor. Buttering him up can be done by complimenting him, among other kind acts; whether or not he buys your sincerity is up in the air.

The goal of trying to escape the fully explorable city while avoiding the policeman's gaze makes for an unsettling and unique premise. Raising the policeman's ire to the point he grabs and lifts you up hundreds of feet to arrest you face to gigantic face is, frankly, terrifying. Militsioner has gripped my imagination as tightly as the policeman does players, and I can't wait to get my hands on it.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Tallboys **DEVELOPER** Tallboys **RELEASE** TBA





Slitterhead

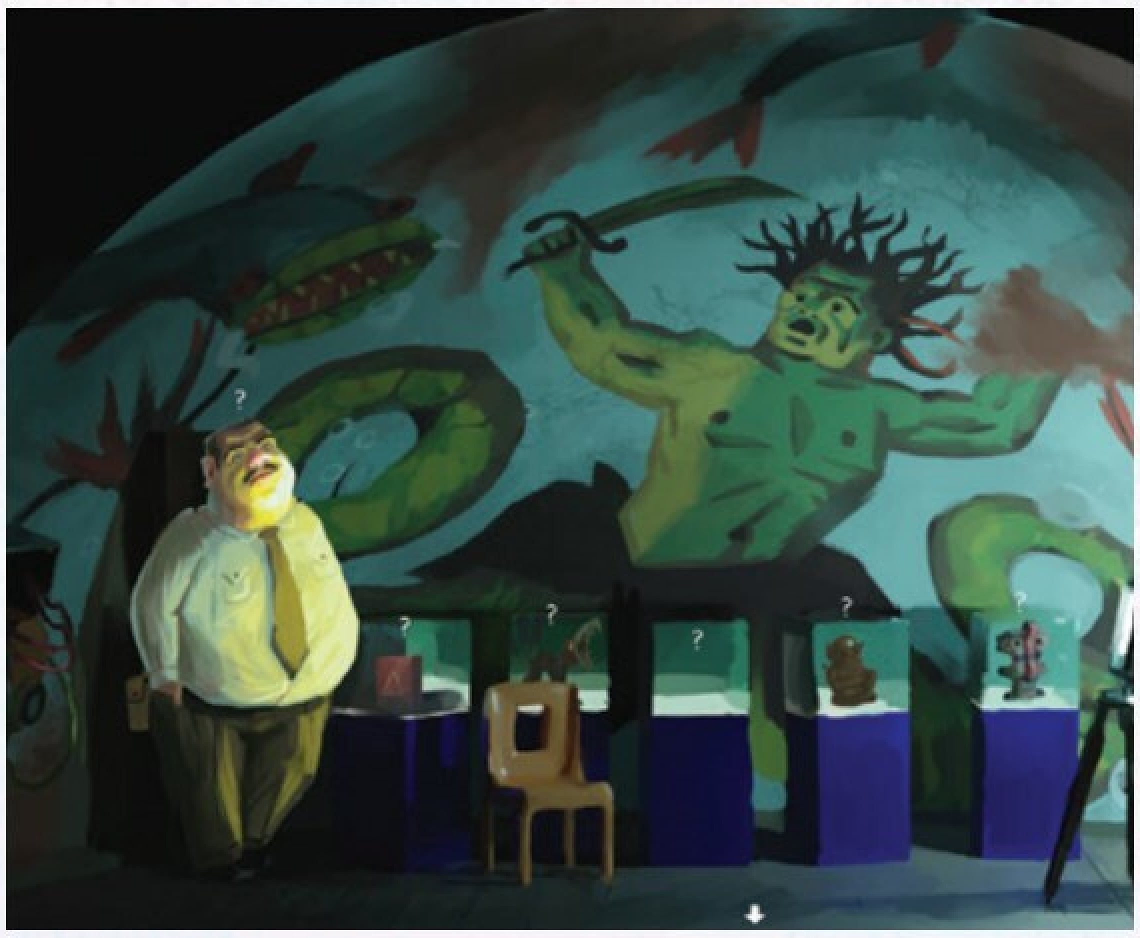
From the minds of madness

Keiichiro Toyama has made some of the most interesting games of the last 30 years. Of course, there's the first Silent Hill game, but also the terrifying Siren series and the mind-melting Gravity Rush series. Now he's leading the independent Bokeh Game Studio, and his first new project, Slitterhead, has the potential to be his next weird hit.

Slitterhead is an action horror adventure game set in Hong Kong, ostensibly around the now-demolished Kowloon Walled City (which has an amazing history you should look up). Something is causing citizens to turn into horrific monsters – probably the "Slitterheads" in question – and our protagonists seem to have magic powers. Bokeh has brought on board a who's who of prolific game creators to help out, such as famed Silent Hill composer Akira Yamaoka to The Last Guardian producer Kazunobu Sato and Miki Takahashi, an incredible artist who worked on Siren.

But I especially want to call out the work Bokeh has been doing on YouTube, made in collaboration with the channel Archipel. Its fantastic "Golden Hour" series hosts interviews between Toyama and creators such as Shinji Mikami (Resident Evil), Junji Ito (*Uzumaki, Tomie*), and Makoto Tabata (Fatal Frame). Its "Dev Diary" series has given looks at the game in development long before the studio formally shows off gameplay (which it hasn't done as of writing). Some of these videos even dive into concerns younger developers have about the project. It's an awesome way to show off a game and be somewhat transparent about development. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Bokeh Game Studio
DEVELOPER Bokeh Game Studio **RELEASE** TBA



The Rise of the Golden Idol

The Case of the Golden Idol is one of the best gems of 2022, so I'm ecstatic to see Color Gray Games make a follow-up. This time, the mystery unfolds in the 1970s, with players solving 15 bizarre cases to locate the powerful artifact. I can't wait to put my thinking cap back on and see how the idol wreaks havoc in a more modern setting. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

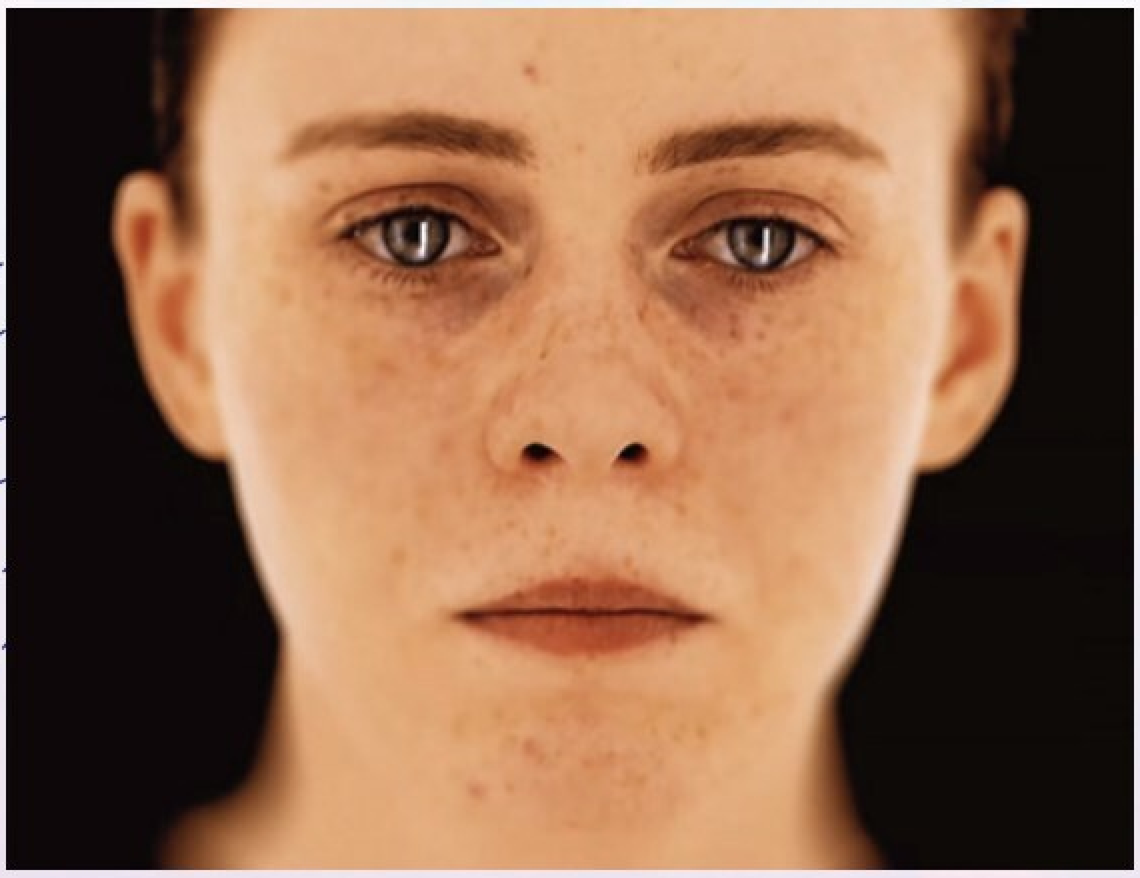
The Casting of Frank Stone

Built as a partnership between Behaviour Interactive and Supermassive Games, this single-player narrative horror adventure is set in the Dead By Daylight universe. Coming to PS5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC, the game transports players to the town of Cedar Hills, Oregon, and the seemingly supernatural reverberations left behind through the gruesome actions of an individual named Frank Stone. **BY MATT MILLER**

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

Cloud's next outing is so big it needs two discs, and that's no surprise based on what we've seen of it. Red XIII and Yuffie join the cast as playable party members, the open world beyond Midgar is expansive and dense with activities, and tag-team-focused synergy attacks enhance combat. The story twists, like Zack's presence, intrigue me the most. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

OD



It's nice to know experimental video games can still be made at a somewhat large scale. Kojima Production's OD is a prime example. Made in collaboration with Xbox, horror director Jordan Peele (*Get Out*), and starring talents like Sophia Lillis (*It*) and Hunter Schafer (*Euphoria*), we're not entirely sure *what* OD *is*, but we do know we want to play (watch?) whatever it ends up being. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

Dragon's Dogma 2

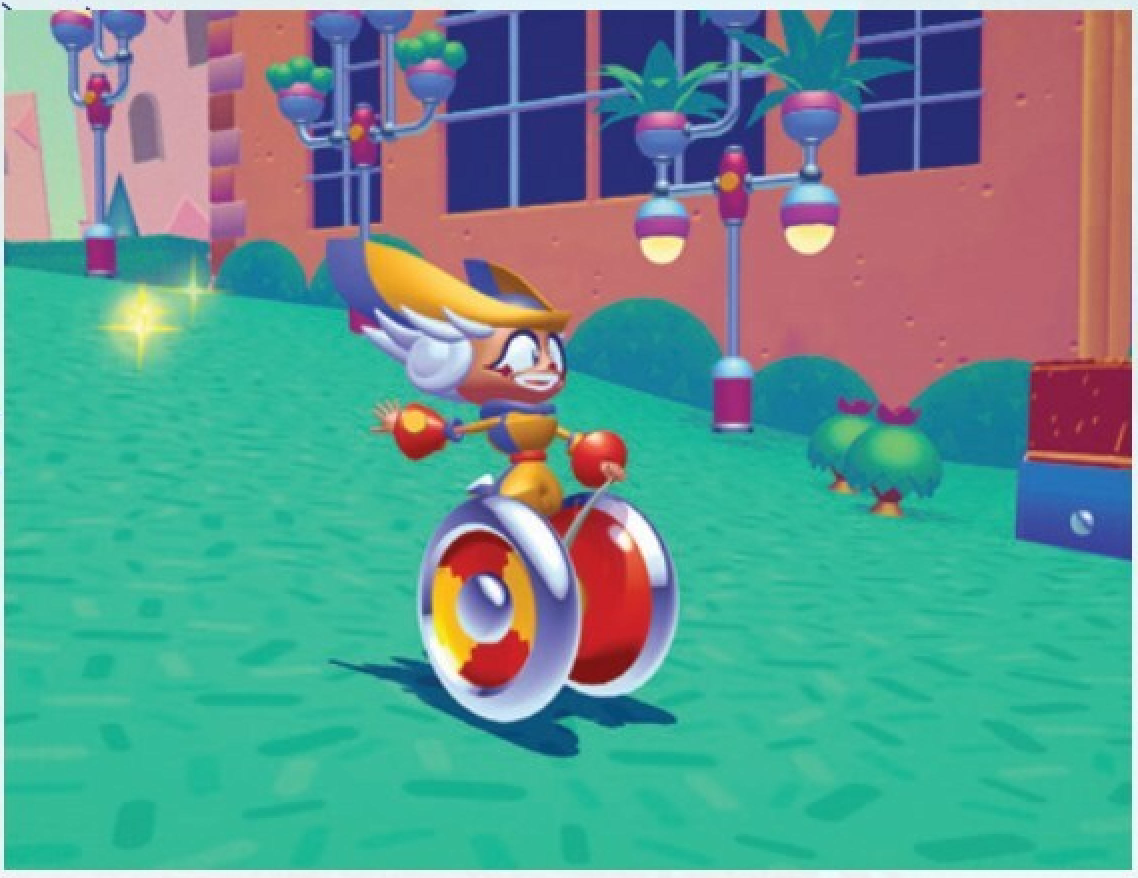
Faith for the sequel

Capcom's fantasy RPG has experienced a strange trajectory. Prior to release, the 2012 game felt like Capcom's uninspired response to games like Dark Souls and Skyrim. But the moment you booted up the game, it greeted you with a soaring rock ballad – not the kind of soundtrack you would expect from an open-world fantasy RPG. Things remained strange once you entered the game. You climbed giant monsters as much as you hit them with your sword and managed Pawns, emotionless human creatures that offered combat support but had no will of their own.

The game was not a hit upon release, but its fans were passionate, and it gained more players over time thanks to re-releases and an animated Netflix adaptation. As is the case with many cult classics, eventually, the demand for a follow-up became overwhelming, which leads us to today, where we are eagerly awaiting an excuse to revisit the world, this time to the lands of Vermund and Battahl. The sequel features new vocations (essentially classes that change the playstyle options) as well as plenty of new options related to how you take advantage of your Pawns. We also know the story functions less as a sequel and more as a concurrent narrative happening alongside the original. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom **RELEASE** March 22

Penny's Big Breakaway



Developer Evening Star is comprised of various leads behind Sonic Mania, and Penny's Big Breakaway is shaping up to be a promising debut. It brings the action to the 3D space with a Tony Hawk's Pro Skater and Devil May Cry-inspired focus on platforming and does so in a Bauhausian world that loves the performing arts. After playing its opening hours, I'm excited for more in 2024. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

Death Stranding 2

Death Stranding was one of the best games of the PS4 generation, so we're excited to go hiking for a second time. Starring a lot of the same talent as the original, what we've seen of the sequel thus far seems to extend the game's story in wild and weird new areas. But also, what's up with all the babies in these games? Seems weird, Kojima. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

Jurassic Park: Survival

Dino-zone

Have you ever wanted to explore Jurassic Park? Me neither. That didn't go so well for the hubris-drunk scientists of the book and movie. But nevertheless, Saber Interactive's upcoming Jurassic Park: Survival is making the prospect at least seem fun.

Announced at the 2023 Game Awards, Survival is a first-person adventure game set one day after the events of the first film. You play as InGen scientist Dr. Maya Joshi, who, unfortunately for her, has been abandoned in the hellish park on Isla Nublar. Though, as you might imagine, she isn't alone. She has plenty of flesh-hungry dinosaurs to keep her company.

The majority of the trailer we've seen thus far is cinematic, which gives us little reason to get too excited about the game, though brief looks at alpha gameplay tucked at the end seem to emphasize stealth and evasion from dinosaurs over direct combat. We see Joshi trying to sneak past creatures as well as directly running from the fearsome Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Interestingly, this is actually the second Jurassic Park: Survival. Back in the early 2000s, Konami, Vivendi Universal, and the now-defunct Savage Entertainment were making a third-person action game of the same name though it was canceled in 2001. Saber's game has no relation other than the name. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Saber Interactive **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive **RELEASE** TBA

Little Nightmares III

A new nightmare

The Little Nightmares series has felt like one of the best-kept secrets in gaming (especially for horror fans), but there's a good chance its third entry will make a bigger splash due to the pedigree of its new developer. While Tarsier Studios made the first two well-received entries, Little Nightmares III is helmed by Supermassive Games, the makers of horror hits like Until Dawn and The Quarry. I'm intrigued to see how it leverages its particular expertise in scare-making with the series' potent brand of surreal terror.

Little Nightmares III follows two protagonists, Low and Alone, as they work together to escape the nightmarish collection of lands called The Spiral. You can play alone with the other character tagging along as an A.I. companion or enlist a friend to brave the creepy adventure in online co-op. Like the first two entries, the 2.5D platforming heavily emphasizes environmental puzzle-solving as players work in tandem to overcome obstacles. That's easier said than done, as copious unsettling threats, such as a giant monstrous baby doll, pursue players.

Despite a new driver taking the wheel, the series' disturbing visuals and atmosphere appear intact, and I can't help but shudder at the number of horrific death scenes Supermassive is likely cooking up. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 to 2-Player Platforming
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Supermassive Games **RELEASE** 2024

Exodus

Becoming the interstellar traveler

Having just recently rewatched *Interstellar* for the probably 10th time, followed by my first watch of *True Detective* Season 1, Matthew McConaughey taking the stage to reveal Exodus had me pumped. It doesn't hurt that the trailer he introduced looks great, too.

Curiously, the Exodus reveal doesn't include McConaughey's character, considering how much Exodus is alluding to *Interstellar*. As the Traveler, the player is humanity's last hope. Humans have fled a dying Earth to make a new home in a hostile galaxy where, for the first time, the human race is the underdog on this cosmic battleground. The Traveler must traverse the stars to hunt down and steal alien weapons and technology powerful enough to defeat the strongest foes in the galaxy: the Celestials.

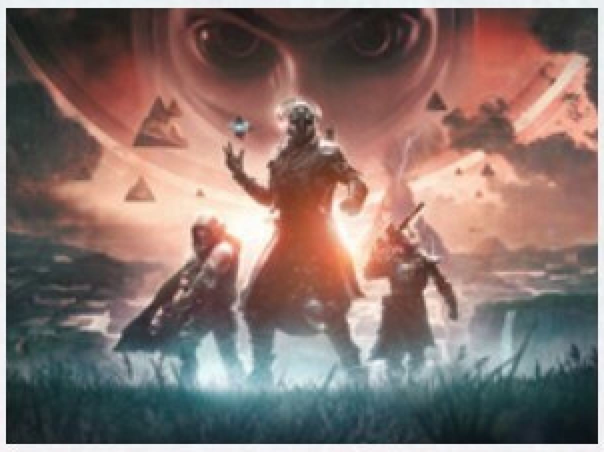
Doing so puts the use of time dilation in the hands of players. Every decision you make on your travels affects the Traveler's loved ones because a quick fight on an alien planet might take decades of time away from your family.

These decisions and alien planet action happen through some sci-fi, third-person action, and the quick snippets of it in the Exodus reveal trailer look great. With no release date in sight, though, a lot could change. But if the final product looks anything like its reveal, Exodus should be alright, alright, alright. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Wizards of the Coast
DEVELOPER Archetype Entertainment **RELEASE** TBA

Most Anticipated Expansions

This year is already shaping up to be great for new releases, but 2024 also gives us plenty of reasons to return to some of our favorites from recent months and years. Here are the expansions and DLCs that excite us most as we plan our gaming schedule.



Destiny 2: The Final Shape

The Final Shape concludes the Light and Darkness saga that began in the first Destiny over a decade ago.

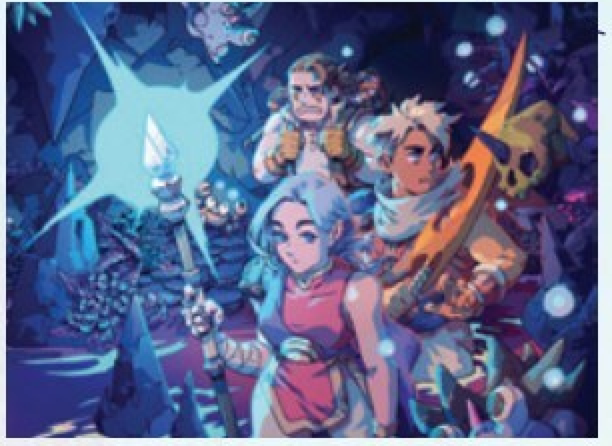
Starfield: Shattered Space

Bethesda has only shared the name of this first story expansion, but the studio's pedigree has our expectations high.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT
THE WAR WITHIN

World of Warcraft: Worldsoul Saga

Made up of three expansions, the first, The War Within, kicks off this new World of Warcraft saga.



Sea of Stars: Throes of the Watchmaker

The loveable party from Sea of Stars returns to help the Watchmaker in a clockwork conundrum.

Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree

It's more Elden Ring. What else do you need to know?

Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail

A new arc begins in the tropical New World known as Yok Tural.

Mortal Kombat 1 Expansion

Creator Ed Boon says players should expect an Aftermath-style story DLC in the future.

Diablo IV: Vessel of Hatred

Vessel of Hatred introduces a new campaign and lush jungle biome to Diablo IV.

Lies of P Expansion

We don't know what or when, but developer Neowiz has teased some kind of connection to Neverland.

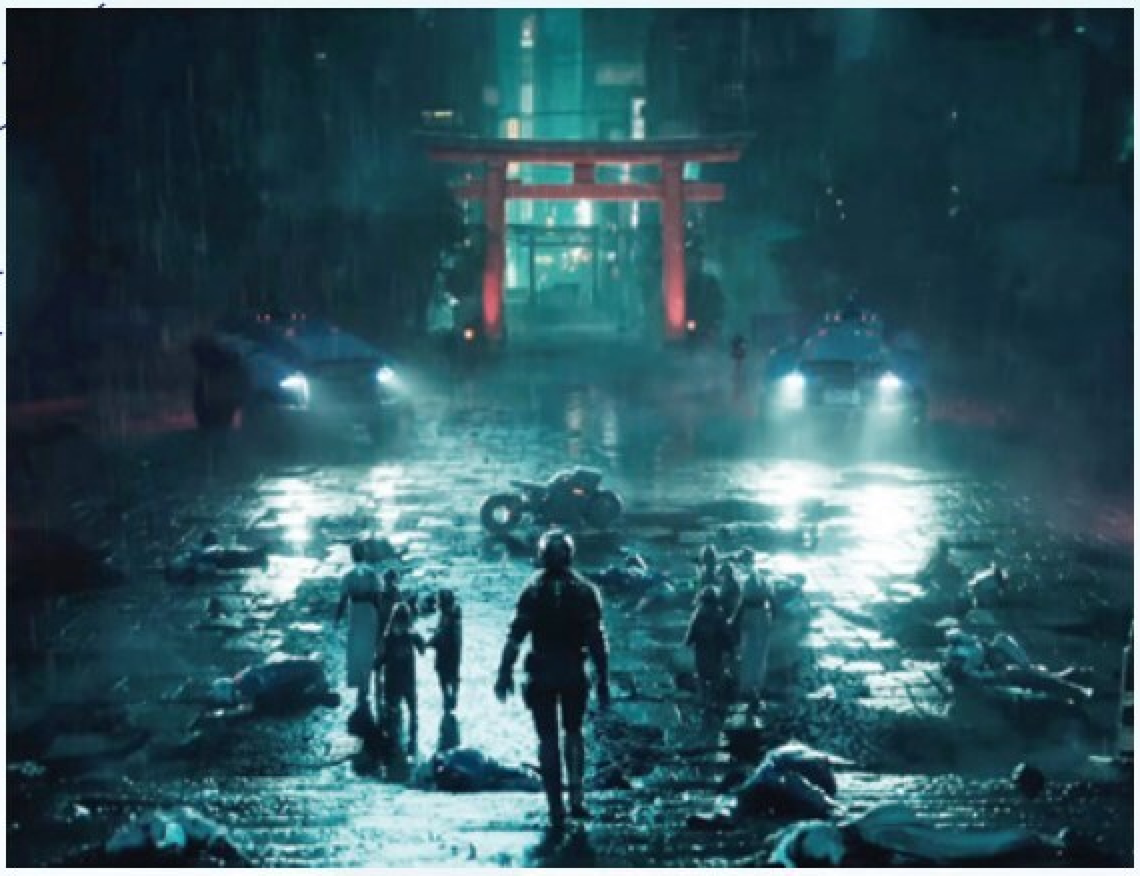
Final Fantasy XVI: Rising Tide

Leviathan, the one Eikon noticeably absent from the base game, becomes the star of the show.

Alan Wake 2: Night Springs/The Lake House

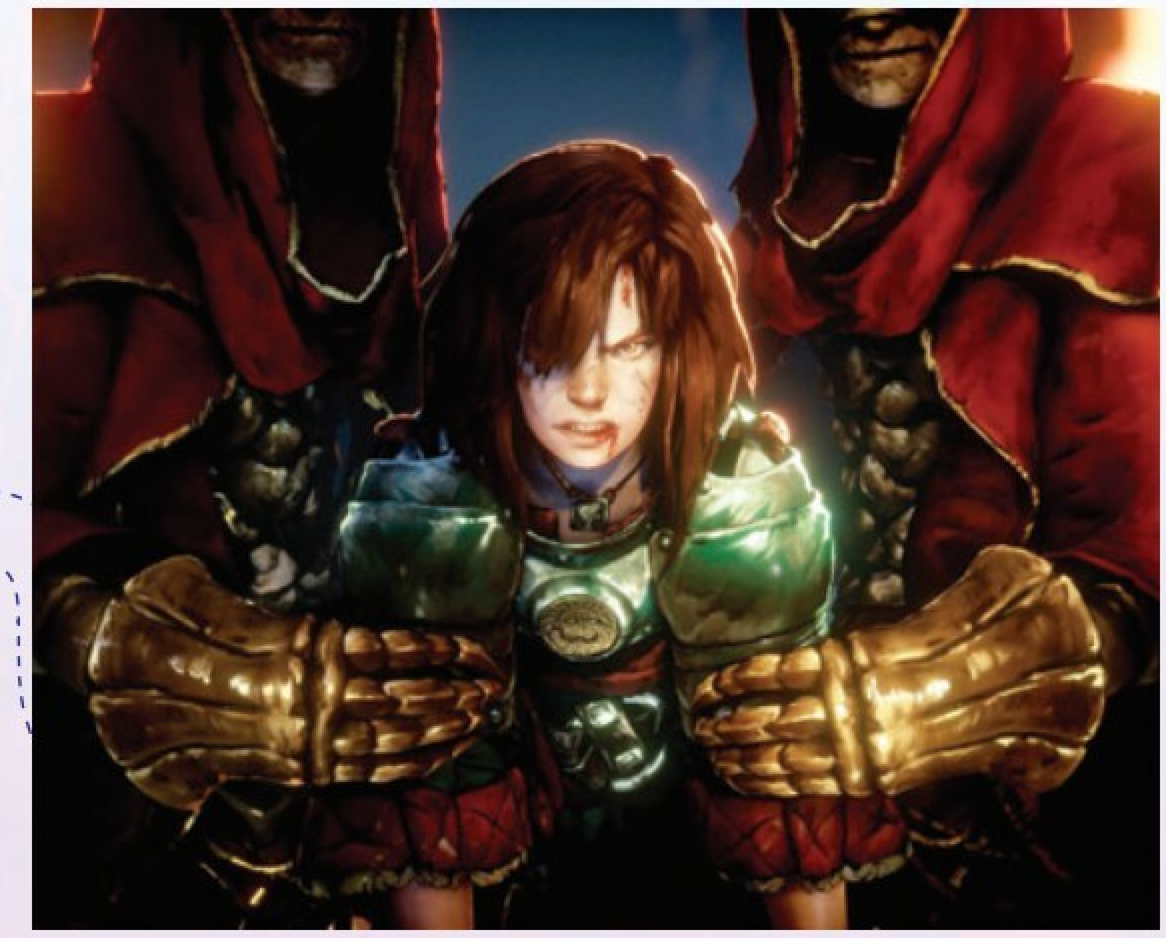
Play as new characters in the in-universe fictional TV show, *Night Springs*, before investigating a mysterious Lake House as Alan and Saga.

Last Sentinel



While it might be Lightspeed LA's debut project, Last Sentinel is certainly not coming from fledgling developers. It boasts talent from the likes of Grand Theft Auto V, God of War, and The Last of Us. The game's story follows a lead named Hiromi Shoda as she navigates a dystopian future version of Tokyo, and early looks suggest brutal action set against a commentary about robotic intelligence and oppression. **BY MATT MILLER**

No Rest for the Wicked



In a wild turn for Ori and the Blind Forest/Will of the Wisps developer Moon Studios, No Rest for the Wicked is an action RPG seemingly in the vein of From Software – but with Moon's trademark lush art style. Both single and multiplayer, it'll be released in early access sometime this year before later coming to PlayStation 5 anad Xbox Series X/S. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

Pony Island 2: Panda Circus

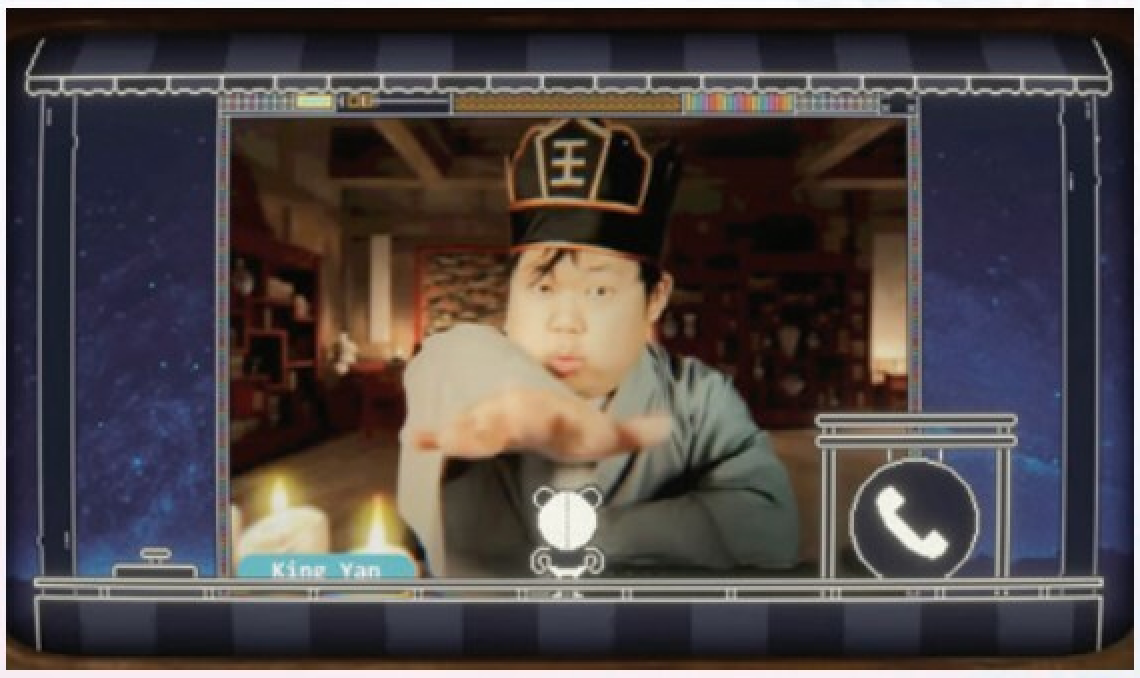
Your guess is as good as mine

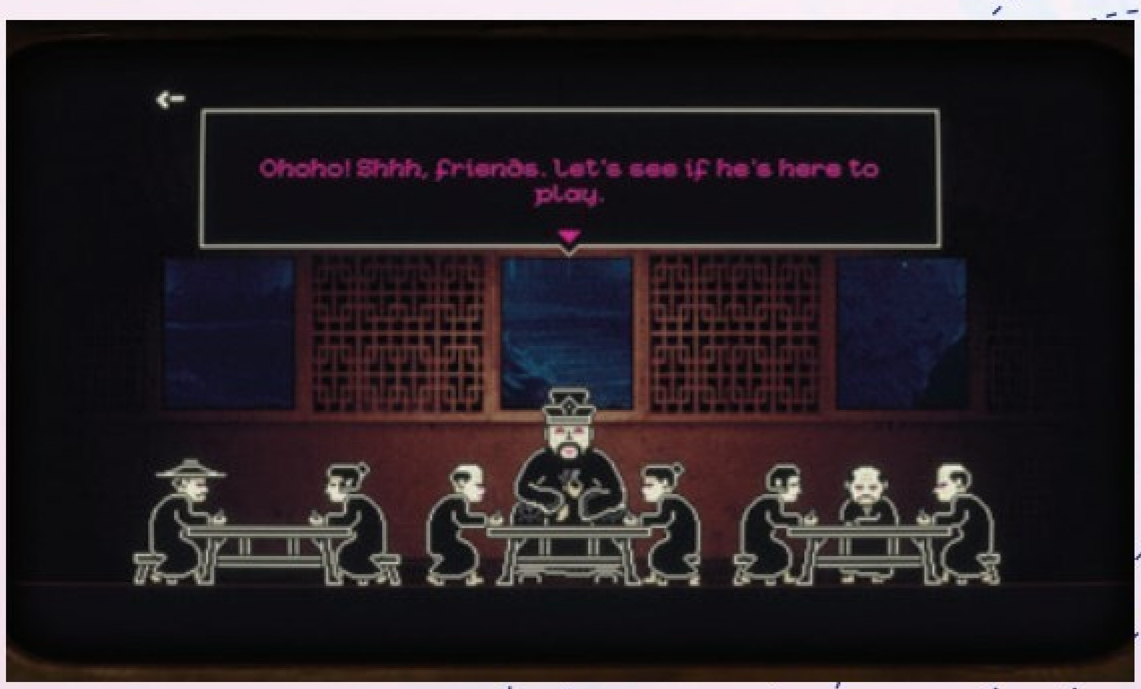
Solo developer Daniel Mullins released Pony Island in 2016, and he's releasing a sequel to it – Pony Island 2: Panda Circus – in 2025. It's easily one of my most anticipated games. My excitement comes less from the original Pony Island (which I haven't played), but because Pony Island 2 is the next game from the developer of my personal 2021 game of the year, Inscryption.

Most excitingly, I've watched the Pony Island 2 reveal trailer a few times, and I still struggle to put together what the hell is going on; I can't wait. In the first Pony Island, players are trapped in a mysterious arcade machine, and that premise seems to exist in its sequel. Its reveal trailer indicates a wild journey awaits players. In just 90 seconds, there's first-person puzzle solving, point-and-click adventuring, retro 2D side-scrolling gameplay, FMV elements, archery, and clues at another meta-narrative akin to Inscryption's.

What I love most about Pony Island 2's reveal is it is promising an experience we can't predict, but I am confident will be one we likely won't forget when we roll credits on it in 2025. Fortunately, that gives me a year to play the first Pony Island. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

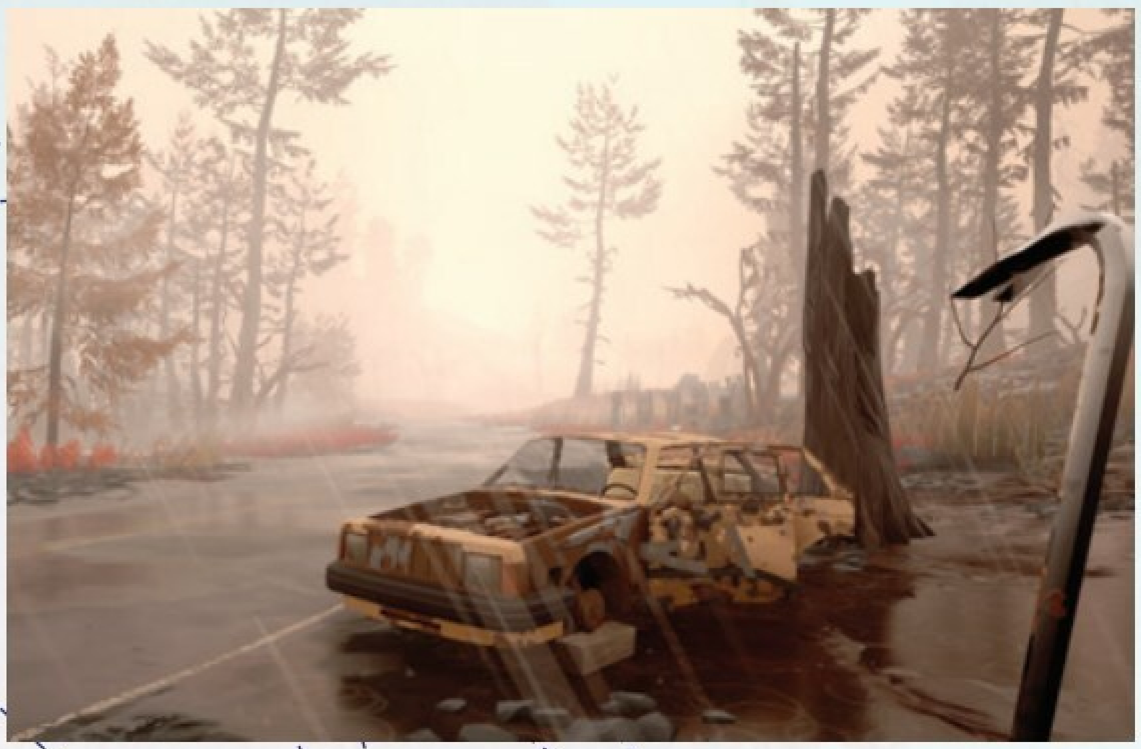
PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Daniel Mullins Games
DEVELOPER Daniel Mullins Games **RELEASE** 2025

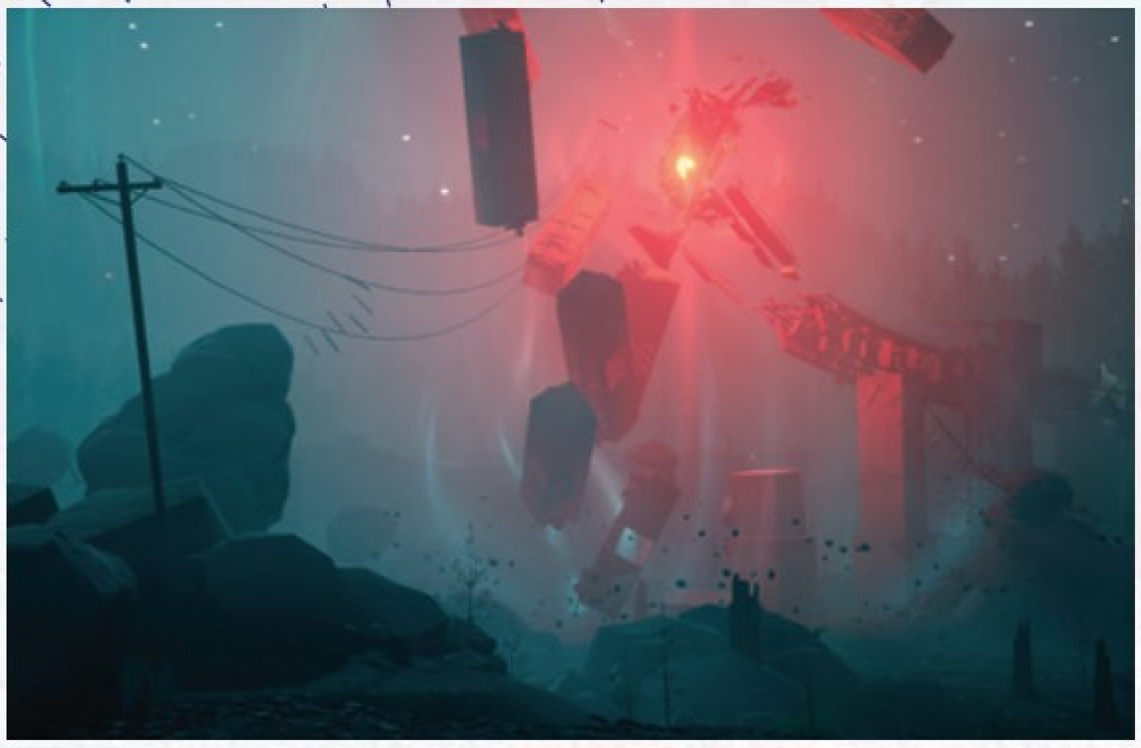




Pacific Drive

Wood panel horror





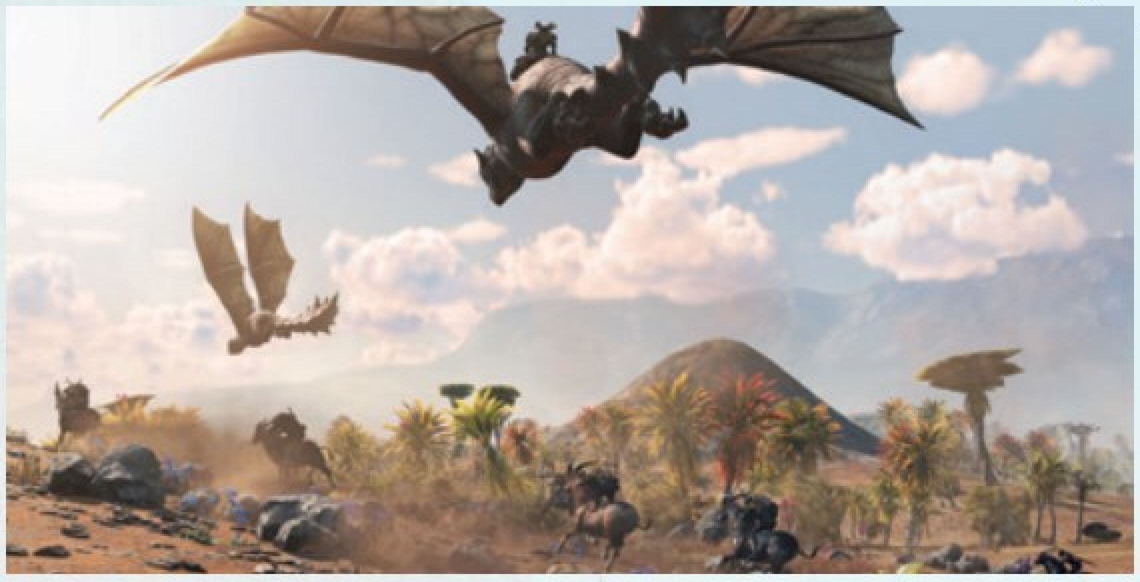
Taking place in a dystopic version of Washington state, Pacific Drive has a unique hook that may grab your attention, even if you're not much of a racing or driving fan. For some mysterious reason, you are struggling to escape a hellscape and the only thing keeping you alive is your station wagon. Played entirely from the first-person perspective, you must maintain and defend your vehicle as you do everything you can to get out. You have a garage that acts as a safe zone where you can upgrade your car, which you must do as every time you attempt to escape, strange creatures will attach themselves to you as you're driving.

Developer Ironwood Studios recently showed us some new gameplay taking place at about the one-third point of the game, and we were quickly gripped by the creepy mood and the threat of the environment. Driving a station wagon through the darkness, fleeing strange creatures as a storm tears up the woods around you while listening to classic rock on the radio is not something we've experienced in a video game before. I'm eager to learn what is happening in the world and doing everything I can to keep myself and my station wagon safe. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Survival **PUBLISHER** Kepler Interactive
DEVELOPER Ironwood Studios **RELEASE** February 22

Light No Fire

A whole new world – literally



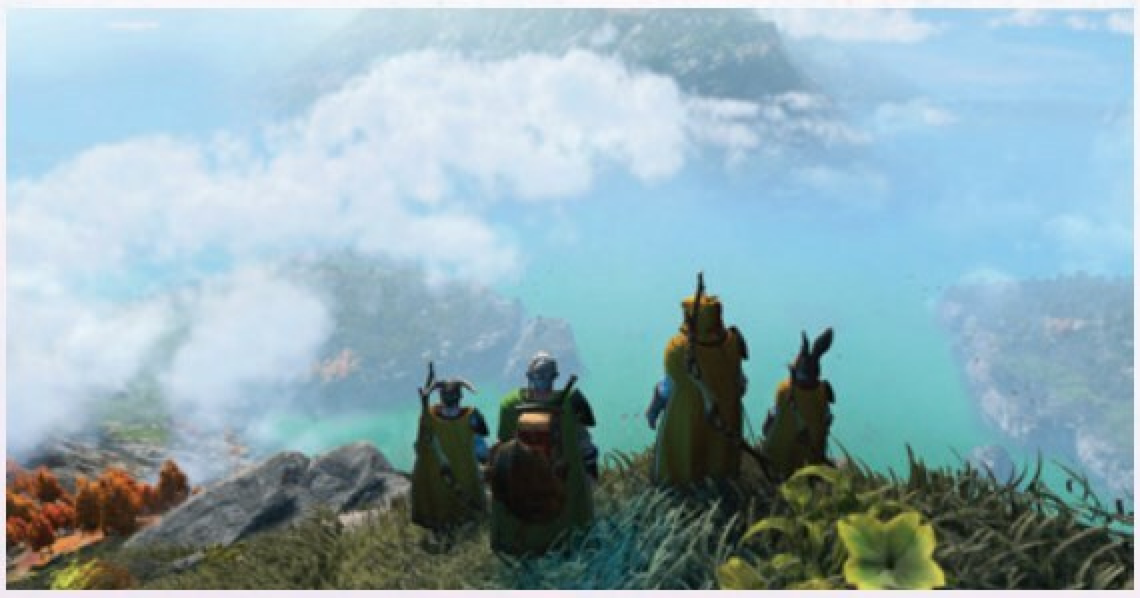
I'm a sucker for a big idea. Which means I'm a *huge* sucker for Light No Fire, the next game from No Man's Sky developer Hello Games.

Light No Fire is, put simply, an open-world MMO. And while I couldn't care less about the latter half of that description, the first half has me champing at the bit. According to studio founder Sean Murray, it's "The first real open-world [...] something without boundaries." Or an actual planet for you to explore. It's hard to think of an idea bigger than the actual globe.

If Hello Games is famous for anything, it's big ideas. Famously, No Man's Sky has 18 quintillion planets – a number that might be real, but I'm not fact-checking – and you can explore each one. Of course, it's important to note that they're relatively sparse and barren. In fact, that was an issue the entire game ran into until Hello Games spent most of the last decade fleshing out its grand idea with actual content.

It's an impossible thing to compare and contrast, but the promise of one fully realized planet is infinitely more interesting to me than 18 quintillion barren ones, of which I may only see .000001%. As a Death Stranding fan, Murray saying the game will have "real" mountains that are miles high has me nearly salivating. I don't know if Hello Games will deliver on its vision – there are plenty of arguments to say it both will and won't – but as of right now, I'm just excited at the idea. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure (Multiplayer TBA)
PUBLISHER Hello Games **DEVELOPER** Hello Games **RELEASE** TBA



South of Midnight

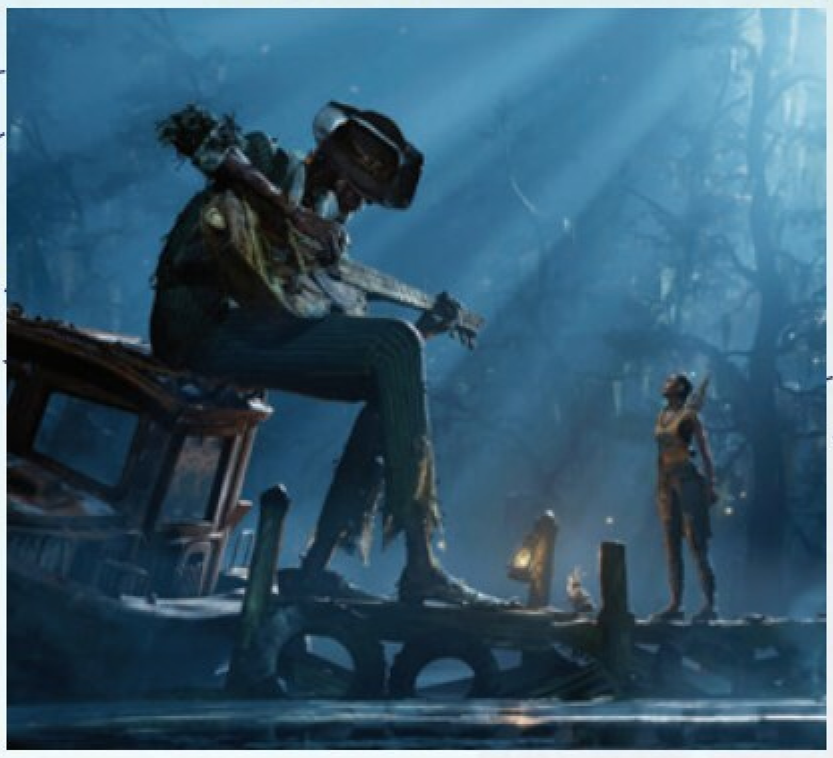
Laissez les bons temps rouler

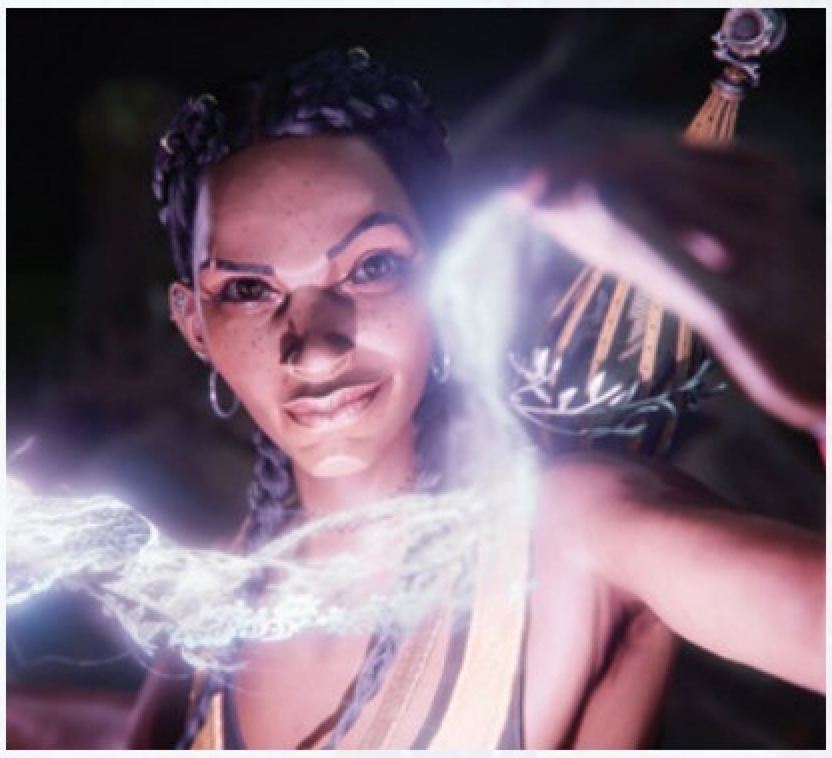
Here's the thing: You set your game in Louisiana, and I will show up for it – it's my duty as the son of a Cajun with a love for the cuisine and culture of the state. It's why South of Midnight, developer Compulsion Games' first title since 2016's We Happy Few, is a game I can't stop thinking about, even six months after its reveal. Set in the American Deep South, with its first trailer heavily alluding to the bayous of Louisiana, South of Midnight promises "a fantastical and macabre third-person action-adventure."

While that hints at some likely terrifying, folktale-inspired action, the reveal trailer is a cinematic tone-setter. We see a woman who appears to be the main protagonist asking a gigantic guitar player named Shaking Bones about the whereabouts of the Altamaha-ha. Part of southern folklore, specifically Georgia, in parts around the Altamaha River, this creature is a river monster not unlike Loch Ness'. Fortunately for our protagonist, the "sneaky" Atlamaha-ha appears nearby her shortly after asking, and the trailer ends before showing us what's next.

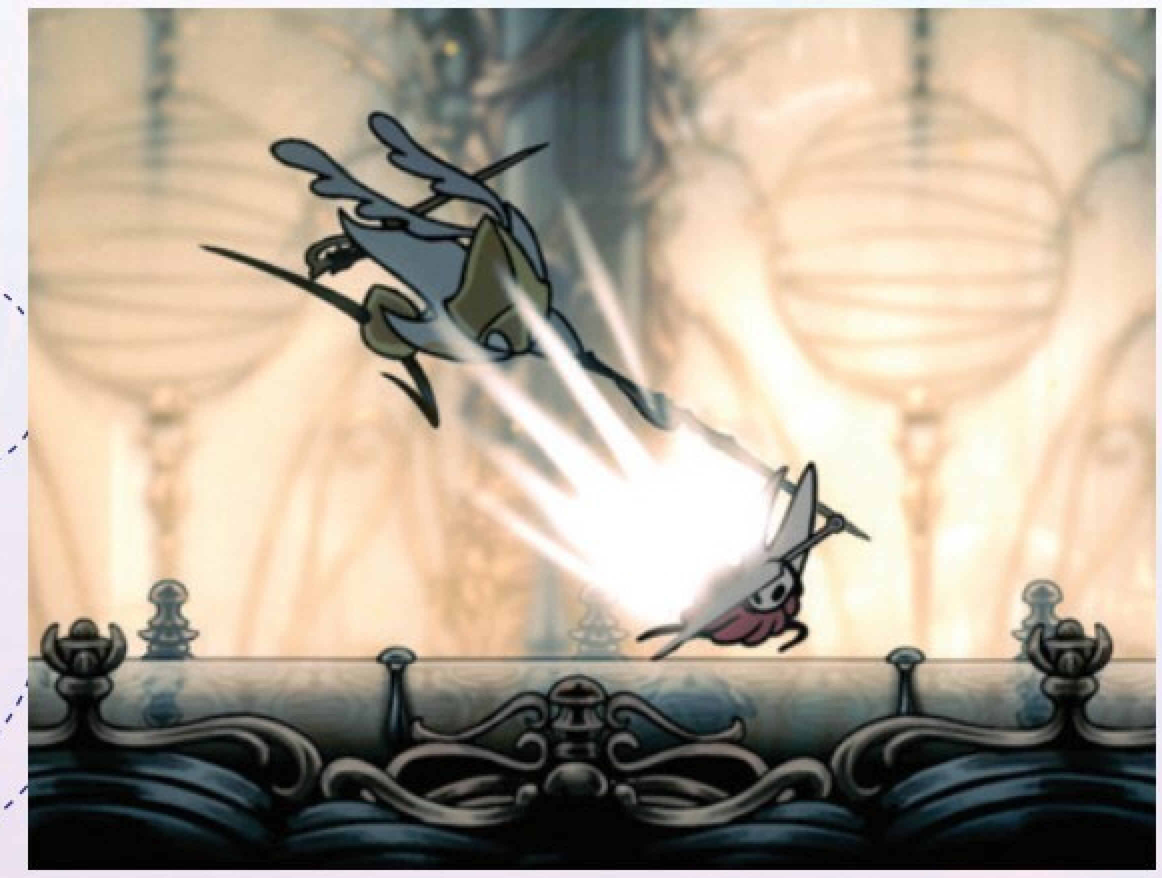
With its stop-motion-esque animation style and an apparent reverence for places like Louisiana, South of Midnight promises a unique romp in a landscape of North American-set games that tend to ignore the better parts of the South. Here's hoping it's one we get to play this year. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER Compulsion Games **RELEASE** TBA





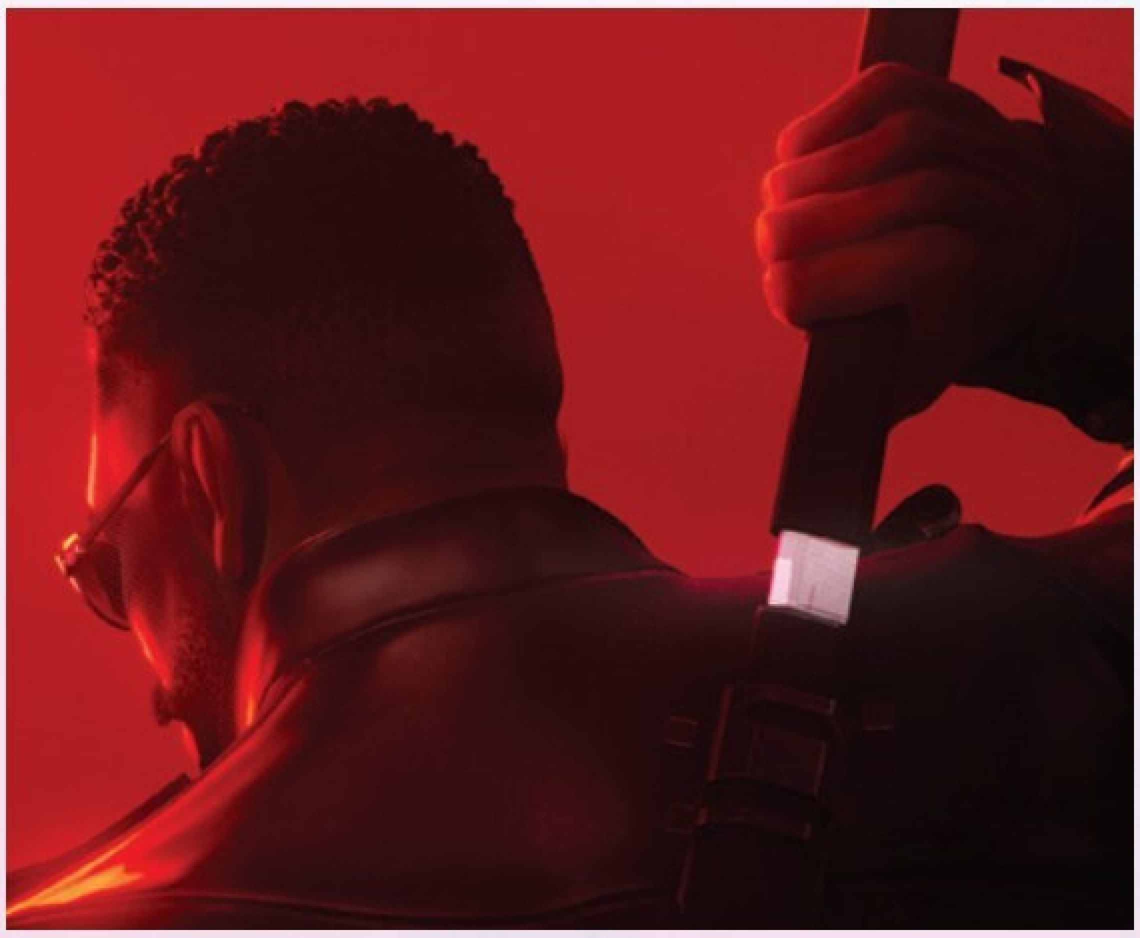
Hollow Knight: Silksong



Team Cherry's ambitious follow-up to the original Hollow Knight seems perpetually out of reach; as of this writing, some four years after its announcement, we still don't have a firm release date. The much-anticipated indie project features the same taut action and alluring artistic direction as the original, but moves the princess-protector, Hornet, into the starring role. **BY MATT MILLER**

Marvel's Blade

At the risk of alienating half the *Game Informer* readership, superheroes like Spider-Man are so boring. But Blade? A sword-wielding half-vampire? Now *that's* cool. Made by one of my favorite developers, Arkane Lyon, we're hopeful Marvel's Blade lives up to the dark, gritty comics and films that preceded it. My fingers are crossed that it also features a blood rave. **BY BLAKE HESTER**



Hyper Light Breaker

Breaking the overgrowth

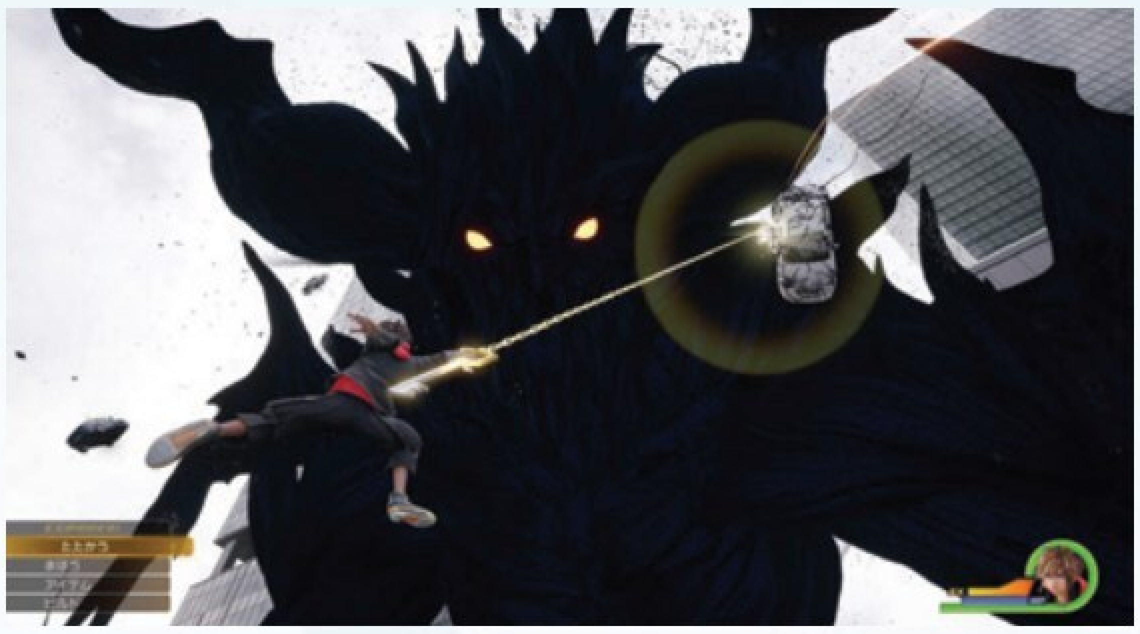
2016's Hyper Light Drifter is a fantastic, focused single-player action game with excellent pixel art, a beautiful soundtrack, and consistent challenge. Developer Heart Machine's follow-up, Solar Ash, took the high-speed movement of Drifter, and brought it into the world of 3D. For its third game, it seems Heart Machine has found the middle-ground between those two titles by returning to its Hyper Light universe, but with 3D visuals and movement.

Despite sharing the Hyper Light moniker, founder and creative director at Heart Machine, Alx Preston, is clear that this is not meant to be a Drifter sequel. He refers to Breaker as a franchise installment, as the gameplay is very different from its predecessor. Functionally a rogue-lite, you are a warrior, or Breaker as they are referred to in-universe, rolling through Overgrowth, a strange land within the world of Hyper Light. You will be able to adjust builds, level up, change weapons, and play alone or with others, all as you attempt to destroy the Abyss King. Heart Machine's previous games give us substantial confidence that controlling your Breaker will be fun as the developer takes movement and combat seriously. We're also excited to just have an excuse to exist in this world again, even if it changes every run. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (2 to 3-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Gearbox Publishing **DEVELOPER** Heart Machine
RELEASE 2024 (Early Access)

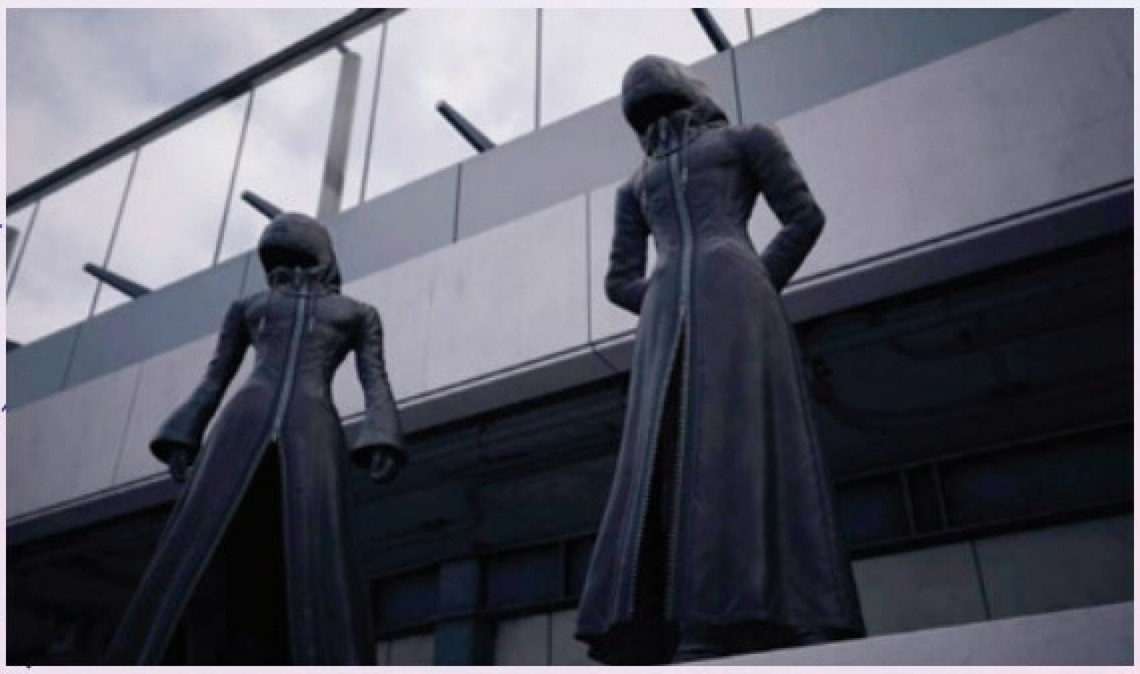
Kingdom Hearts IV

Sora in the city



The initial pitch for the Kingdom Hearts series was a deceptively simple one: combine the Square Enix RPG tone and style (and a few Final Fantasy characters) with Disney properties. Even before the end of that first game, however, the franchise was overloaded with dense lore, complicated themes, and just generally confusing plot elements. Kingdom Hearts IV will no doubt retain the labyrinthian storytelling the series has become known for, but the next entry represents a reset of sorts.

Kingdom Hearts III was the end of the "Dark Seeker Saga," and IV marks the beginning of what Square Enix is calling the "Lost Master" arc. We don't know the Disney of it all yet (though Donald and Goofy definitely appear), but we do know a large portion of the game takes place in Quadratum, which is the closest Sora has ever come to visiting the real world. Footage of the location shows a realistic setting inspired by Tokyo, complete with cars and busy city intersections. Sora apparently lives something close to a normal life in Quadratum with routines in which the player will participate. But don't expect it to become a simulation game – Sora retains impossible but flashy parkour skills and still battles the Heartless. It may be the perfect opportunity to jump into the series or return if you have lapsed. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**



PLATFORM TBD **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix Creative Business Unit I **RELEASE** TBA

Rise of the Rōnin

History with a twist

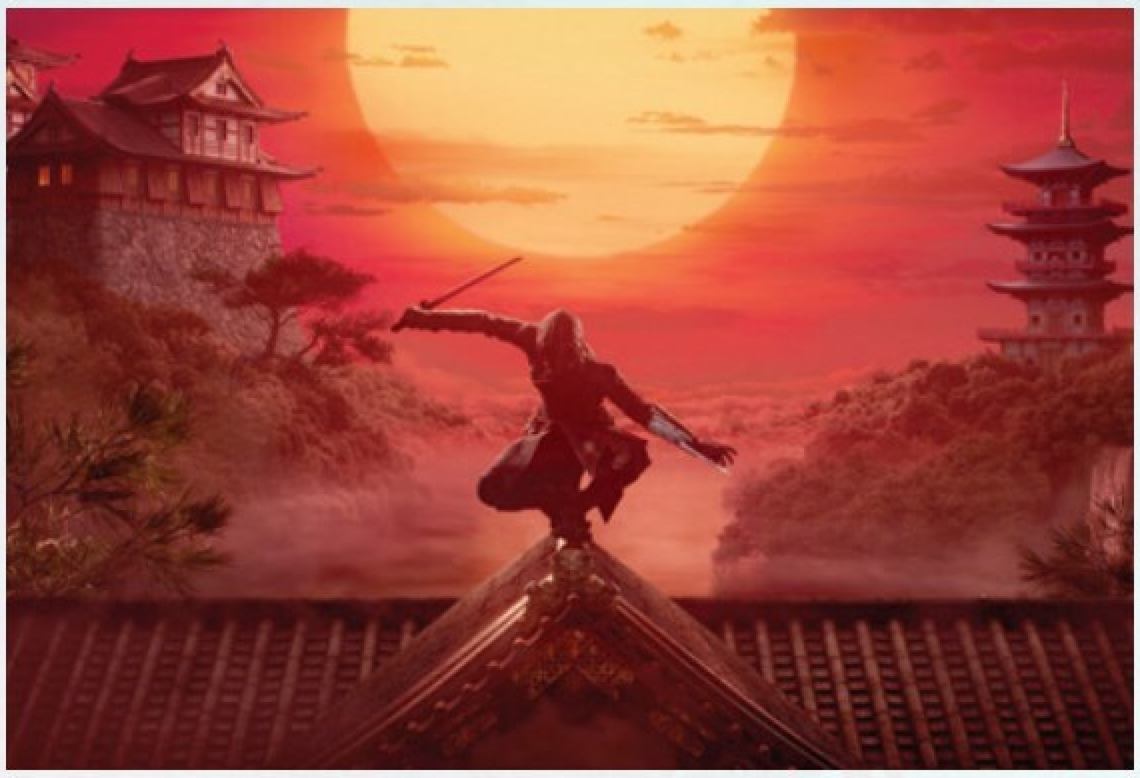
After successfully carving its own identity in the Soulslike space with the Nioh series and Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty, Team Ninja is tackling its most ambitious action game yet in Rise of the Rōnin. Although the combat retains much of the DNA of the studio's most recent works, it's been translated into a fully open world that incorporates choice-driven storytelling and a focus on real-life events.

As a history nerd, I'm most intrigued by Rise of the Rōnin's historical elements and more grounded tone compared to Nioh and Wo Long. Set in 1863 during Japan's tumultuous Bakumatsu period, which saw the nation transform itself after coming into contact with the West after centuries of isolation, players control a Rōnin – a samurai without a master – who finds himself caught in the middle of political and societal upheaval. Choice-driven gameplay steers the story, and I'm curious to see how impactful decision-making will be.

Exploring a fully open world set in this fascinating period is a thrilling proposition. Traversal mechanics, such as a grappling hook and a glider, sweeten the deal as they are as useful for getting around as they are for executing flashy aerial assassinations. Weapon-based melee looks as satisfying as I'd expect from the studio, and the addition of guns adds a neat wrinkle. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Koei Tecmo
DEVELOPER Team Ninja **RELEASE** March 22

Assassin's Creed Codename Red

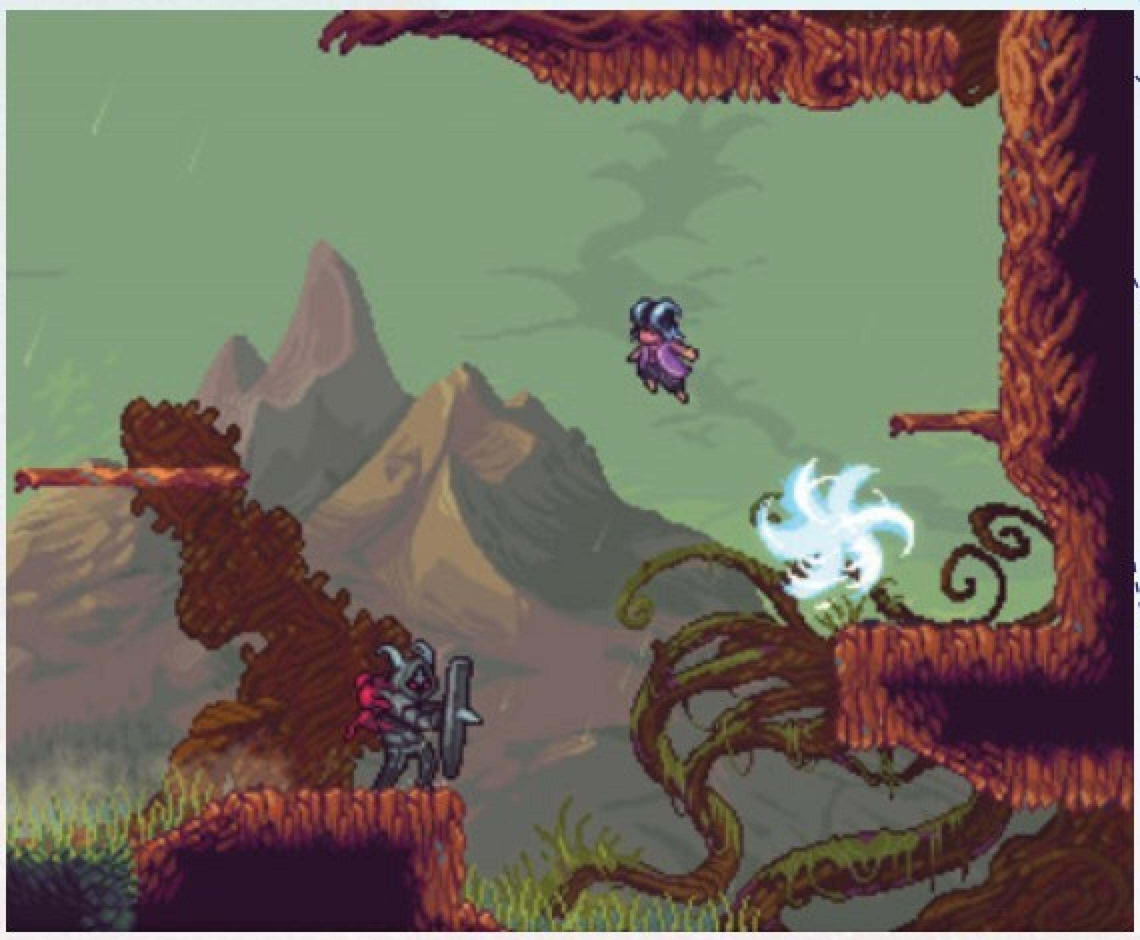


Since the franchise's first appearance in 2007, fans have clamored for an entry set in Japan. Codename Red is just that, letting players take on the Shinobi/ Ninja fantasy in a journey across historical Japan. The developers at Ubisoft Quebec are many of the same that brought us Syndicate and Odyssey, two strong entries that leave me especially excited to see where one of my favorite series goes next. **BY MATT MILLER**

Earthblade

Earthblade is a Metroidvania set in a pixelated verdant fantasy world. Between the music and the art style, the vibe in its 2022 gameplay trailer has kept me going ever since, and I'm not surprised. It's the next project from the team that brought us two fantastic games, Celeste and Towerfall – what more could you ask for?

BY CHARLES HARTE



S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl

Irradiated intensity

Developer GSC Game World revealed S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl in 2020 alongside word that the previously PC-exclusive series would be coming to Xbox Series X/S as a console exclusive. While its predecessor and spin-offs might not seem too big in the world of first-person shooters, the series surpassed 15 million sales in 2021, so the sequel widening its audience to Xbox is likely to be a smart move for the franchise.

Set in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone in a post-apocalyptic world, Heart of Chornobyl promises an open, choice-driven, survival-horror experience, complete with horrific radiated mutants. Its various gameplay trailers over the years have always impressed. While it was initially due out in 2022, GSC delayed the game after Russia invaded Ukraine, forcing employees based in places like the capital of Kyiv to evacuate to safety.

It's finally due out this year and aims to be both an excellent sequel and a symbol of hope and perseverance for the developers who continued to work while their homes were under attack (with some even volunteering to fight back against Russia). It's a game I'm happy to support when it releases this year; it doesn't hurt that everything we've seen so far is gorgeous and something unique in the otherwise often stale triple-A shooter space. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** GSC Game World
DEVELOPER GSC Game World **RELEASE** September 5

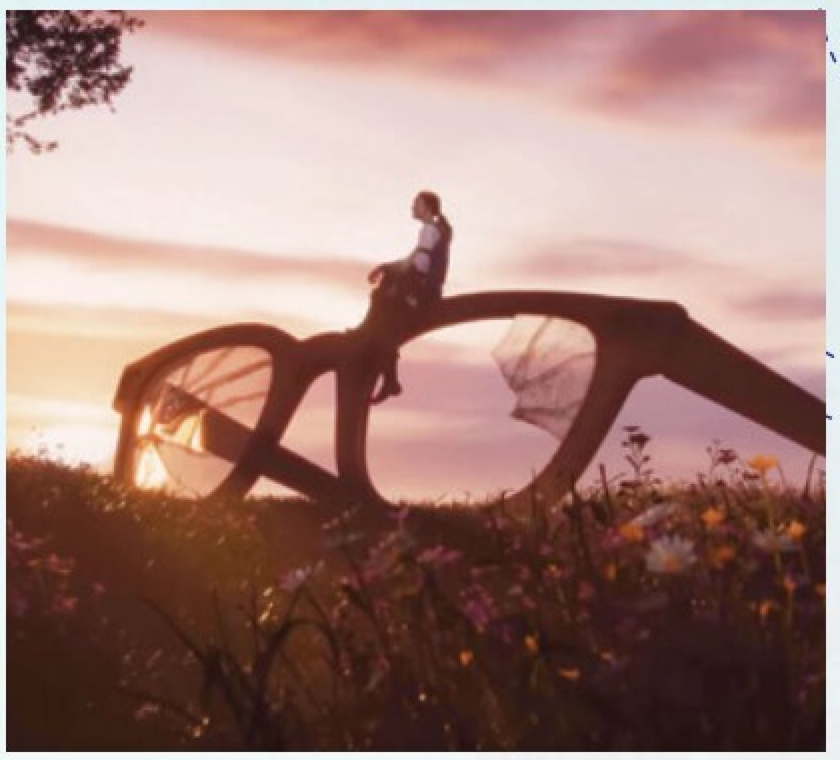
Fable

Chicken kicker returns

Microsoft announced its plans to return to the Fable universe several years ago, but it has been slow to offer substantial details. The first three games and its various spinoffs were so specific to Lionhead Studios and its ambitious co-founder, Peter Molyneux, that anyone else tackling a game based in the universe seemed like a difficult prospect. That might explain why development is taking so long, but we're happy to wait, especially after seeing the game's first proper trailer.

Developer Playground Games made all the Forza Horizon games, which at a glance, makes an odd fit for an RPG. But the studio is practiced at making open-world games that are fun to explore, and it is based in England, which is an important part of Fable's DNA. Optimistically, and based on only one trailer and a pre-rendered tease, Fable's humor seems intact. Richard Ayoade of *The IT Crowd* fame appears in the game as Dave, the vegetable enthusiast (who is also a giant), complaining about how annoying heroes are, which feels right for Fable. We also got to see townspeople get frustrated with the antics of heroes and be woefully unimpressed when they kicked a chicken. We'll have to wait to play to learn if combat is fun, and if the choices you make have real meaning, but if nothing else, Playground Games seems to have the tone right, which goes a long way. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER Playground Games **RELEASE** TBA



Kemuri

Ghostwire unseen tokyo

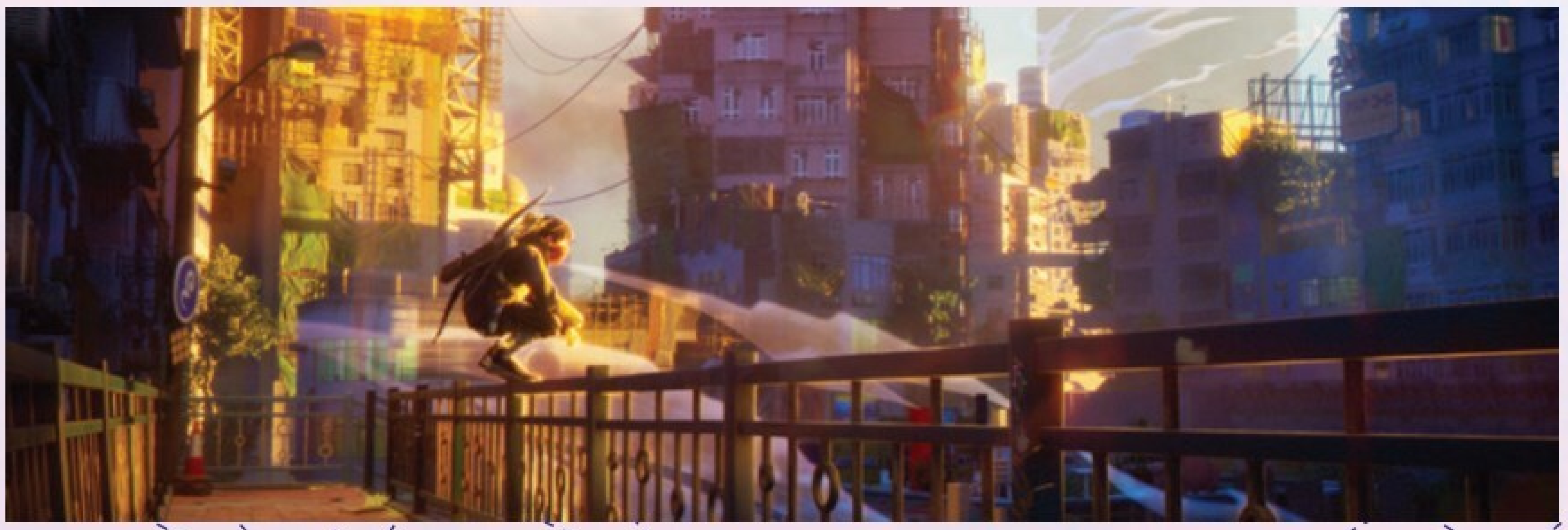
Former Tango Gameworks designer Ikumi Nakamura gained popularity after her joyful reveal of Ghostwire: Tokyo at E3 2019. She'd later leave the company before that game's release to start her own studio, Unseen. That Unseen's first game reveal was as energetic as its director is fitting.

Kemuri is the name of Unseen's first original IP and is currently in a conceptual phase. It debuted at The Game Awards 2023, with an introduction from Nakamura herself. If I didn't know better, I'd say Kemuri looks like a non-spooky version of Ghostwire: Tokyo. Seemingly set in Tokyo, Kemuri features slick and stylish action and contains numerous folktale-inspired creatures whom our band of parkouring protagonists (plural because there is multiplayer) are up against.

These characters slide down walls, flip through the air, and use the city's verticality to their advantage before facing an onslaught of these monsters. And it all looks great, although it's just cinematics, so I'm keeping my expectations of the actual game it turns out to be one day in check.

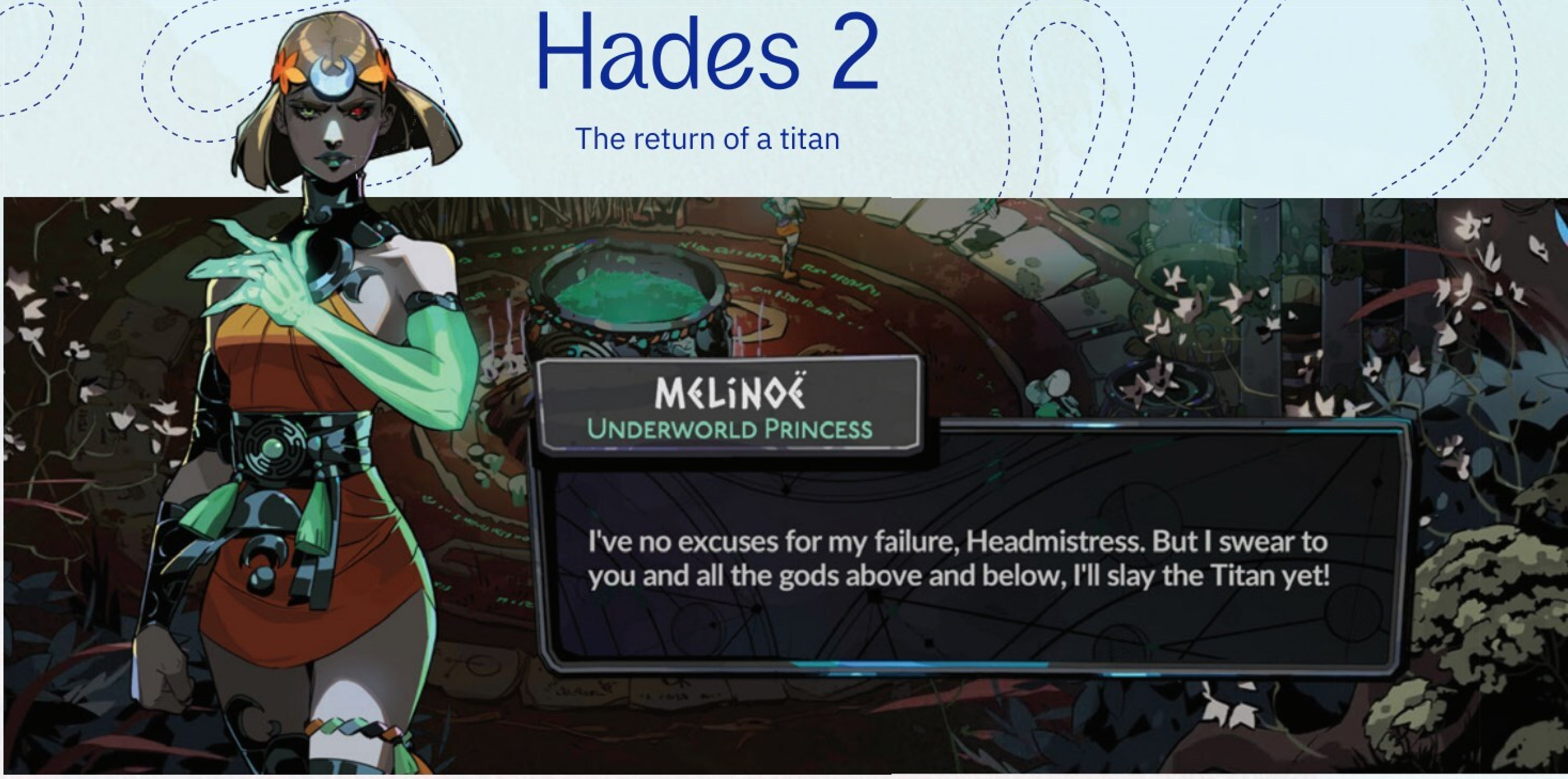
It could be a while, too, because Kemuri doesn't yet have a publisher, and there's no word on where and when we'll be playing it. For now, I look forward to seeing when Nakamura will again take the stage to reveal more about this neon-infused adventure. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBD) **PUBLISHER** TBD **DEVELOPER** Unseen **RELEASE** TBA



Hades 2

The return of a titan



MELINOË
UNDERWORLD PRINCESS

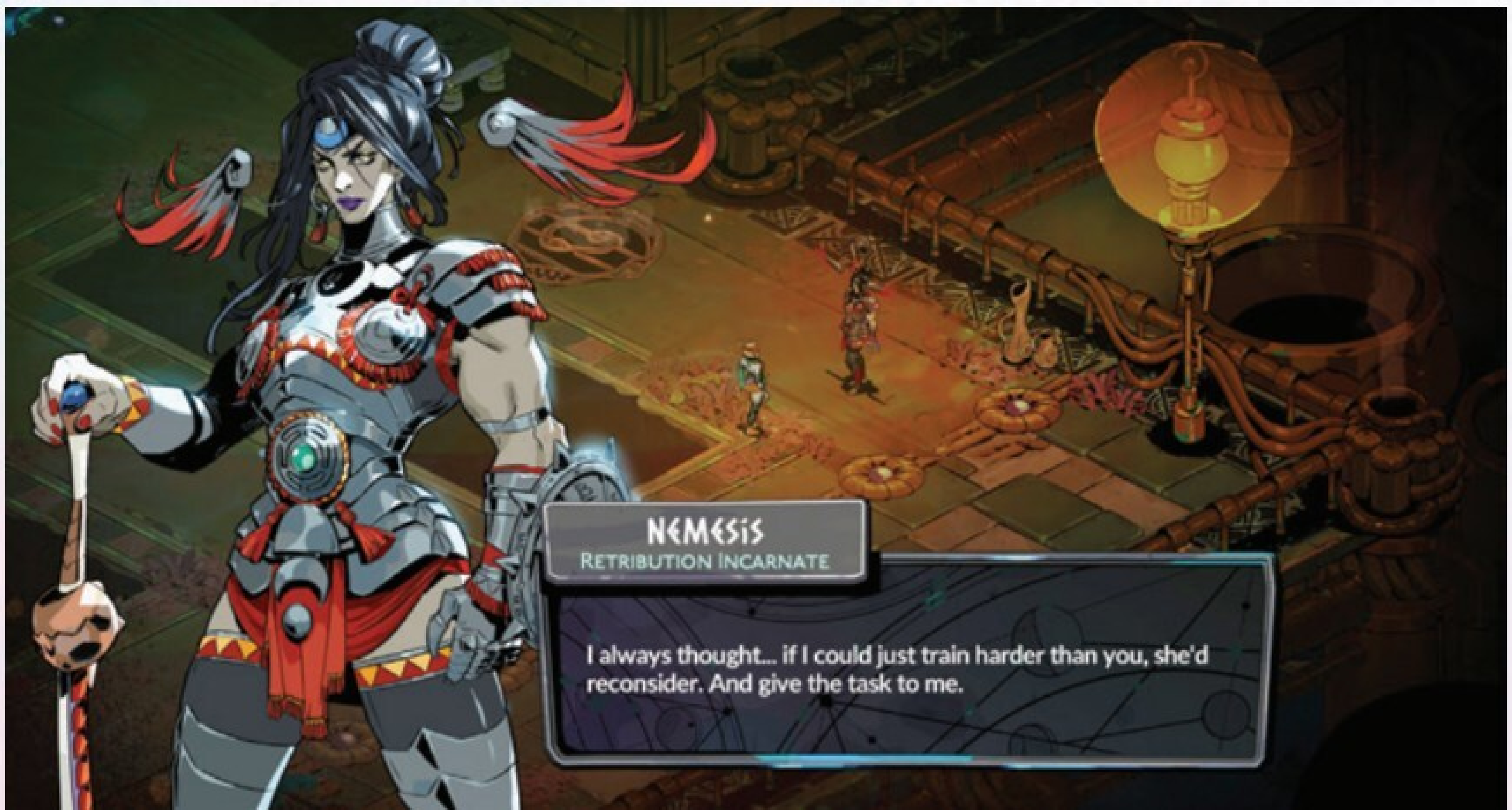
I've no excuses for my failure, Headmistress. But I swear to you and all the gods above and below, I'll slay the Titan yet!

Supergiant Games has never made a sequel, but if there was ever a game that warranted one, it was Hades. It's the roguelike to end all roguelikes, packaging a compelling story, thrilling combat, and satisfying progression into one beautiful package. This made the announcement of Hades 2 as surprising as it was exciting since fans, myself included, just couldn't wait to dive back into the depths of the Underworld.

The sequel stars an entirely new child of Hades named Melinoë whom Supergiant describes as "an immortal witch and a sorceress with powerful magical abilities." While Zagreus had the goal of escaping the Underworld, Melinoë has a much more menacing foe – Chronos, the Titan of Time. Chronos also happens to be the father of Hades, who we see bound by shackles in the reveal trailer. With the help of the witch Hecate, Melinoë's goal is to defeat Chronos, and presumably rescue Hades. As a fan of Greek mythology, I'm excited to see Supergiant's take on the big bad.

The reveal trailer also had some fresh gameplay clips, showing off new characters, new gods, and Melinoë's new weapons, which include a sickle/dagger combo and a staff. We'll get a chance to meet the myths and wield those weapons ourselves when Early Access opens in Q2 of this year. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC • Consoles TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Supergiant Games
DEVELOPER Supergiant Games **RELEASE** 2024 (Early Access)



NEMESIS
RETRIBUTION INCARNATE

I always thought... if I could just train harder than you, she'd reconsider. And give the task to me.

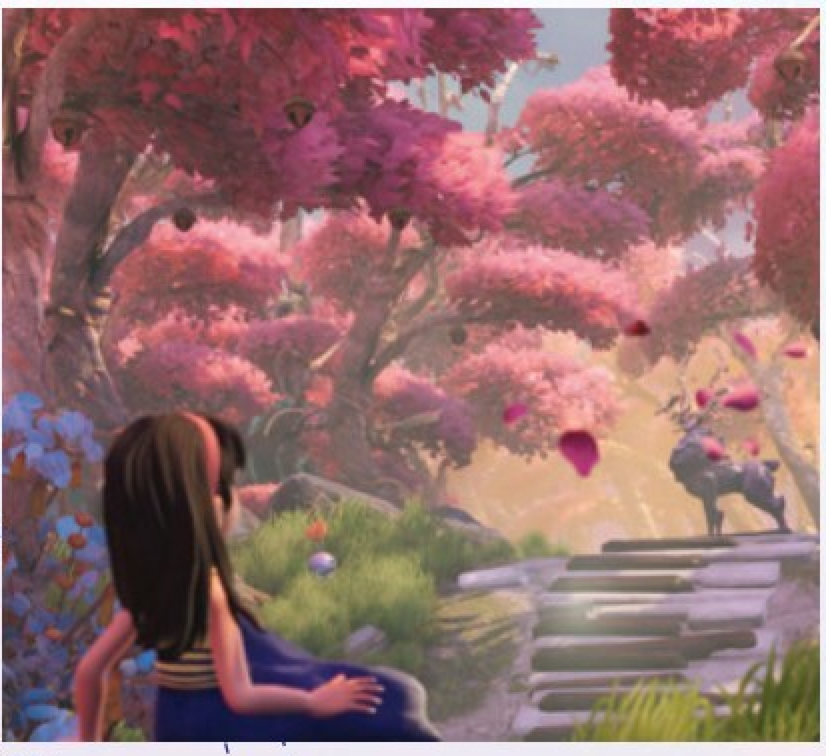
Mario vs. Donkey Kong

Return of the puzzles of the ape

While both Mario and Donkey Kong made their debut in the same arcade game, it's ironic that the two don't have that many games where they interact with each other, excluding party games. Because of that, the Mario vs. Donkey Kong series is interesting from a lore perspective – these two, despite both being heroes, often don't get along. The series has been quiet for nearly eight years, following a few lackluster entries, but with this new remake, Nintendo is seemingly rewinding the gears on its abandoned toy.

In this game, originally released for the Game Boy Advance, Donkey Kong raids Mario's toy factory, hoarding Mini Marios for himself. Mario sets out on a quest to get them back, completing a series of platforming puzzles to do so. We haven't played the game, so it's hard to say if the gameplay holds up, but it certainly looks far better than it did back in 2004. The remade version also comes with local co-op, so you can complete puzzles with a friend on the couch and a friendly Toad on the screen. As someone who never got to play the original, I'm excited to see what all the fuss is about. We'll be able to play it (nearly 20 years after the original) this February. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 2-Player Puzzle **PUBLISHER** Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo **RELEASE** February 16



Harmonium: The Musical

Music for all

Primarily known for its indie hit, The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom, The Odd Gentlemen is contributing to the growing movement of games for and about accessibility. Harmonium: The Musical is an "interactive sign language musical and adventure/narrative game," which is a genre mouthful. But early glimpses of the game suggest a creative and whimsical approach that is immediately appealing.

With characters and a game world that wouldn't seem out of place in a Pixar film, Harmonium follows 10-year old Melody Macato, a deaf Filipino-American with ambitions to share her music with the world. Following time-honored story traditions akin to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Melody falls into an alternate world in which all music is visualized. Puzzles and in-game mechanics lean heavily into non-verbal communication.

As one might expect, given the subject matter, accessibility considerations are at the forefront of design, including the developer's description of a "visual language for music, animated subtitles on musical numbers, customizable captions/UI/controls, characters who fully communicate through ASL, a high-contrast gameplay mode, dubbed or subtitled mode, and more." It's exciting to see a talented studio experiment with new approaches to storytelling, which makes this one of the narrative experiences I'm most excited to see come together in the coming months. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER The Odd Gentlemen
DEVELOPER The Odd Gentlemen **RELEASE** TBA

Princess Peach: Showtime

An overdue spotlight

Mario is the most iconic character in all of gaming, so it's always been a wonder why we didn't get more spin-offs based on his nearly-as-famous supporting cast of characters. Princess Peach: Showtime is an exciting experiment into what one of those spin-offs could look like, following the titular pink monarch through a theater-themed adventure. It's not Peach's first solo game, but it is her first one in over a decade, and Nintendo is starting from scratch. This is probably the game's most promising aspect – it hasn't even come out yet, but it already has a distinct identity.

As Peach, you've got to stop the Sour Bunch, a group of grape-like beings that have ruined the show at the Sparkle Theater. To do so, Peach dons a number of outfits, each of which changes the gameplay somehow. A musketeer's costume has her sword fighting foes, while a chef's uniform has her piping icing onto a giant cake. If I had to make a comparison, the outfit swapping is most reminiscent of the Kirby series, but Kirby's outfits often don't change the way you interact with the world nearly as much. Peach's outfit changes seemingly change the entire genre, at least temporarily. When given the space, Peach can be an interesting character, and I'm excited to spend more time with her when this game comes out in March. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Nintendo **RELEASE** March 22

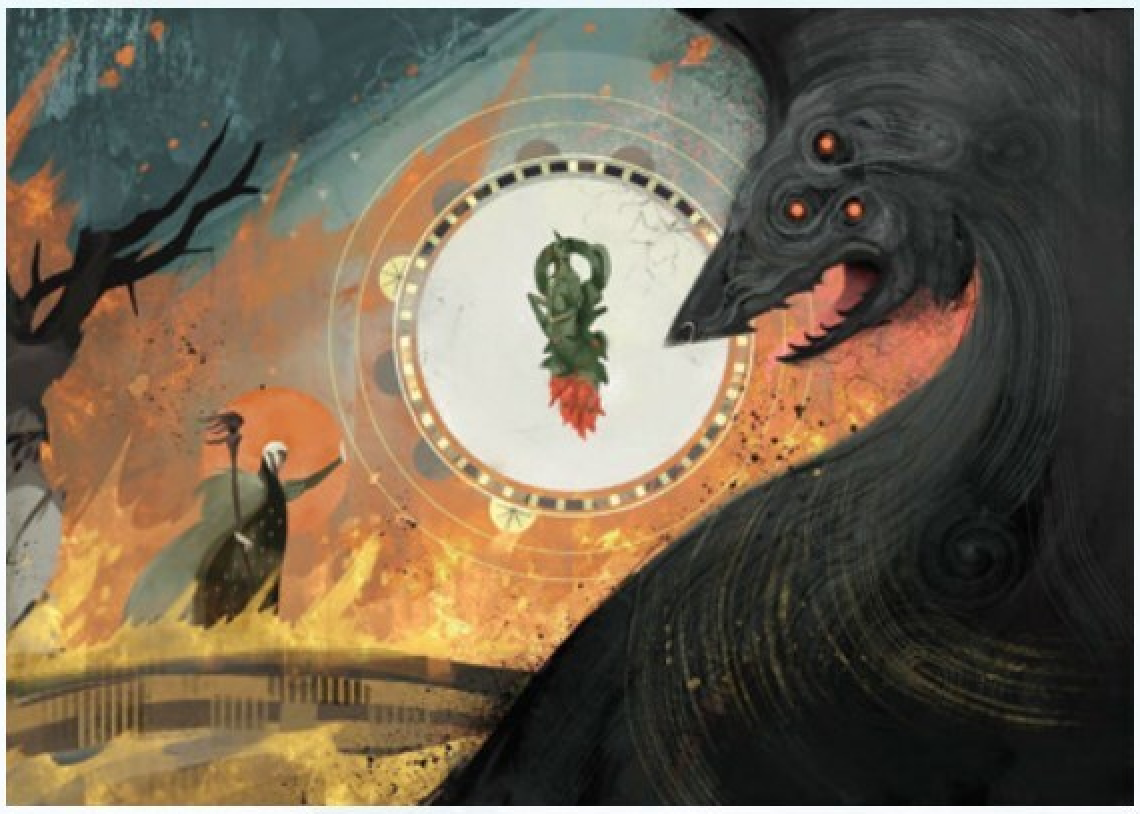
Haunted Chocolatier

Eric "ConcernedApe" Barone struck gold with Stardew Valley, but his next project is a little different. The farm has been traded for an old chocolate shop that you're tasked with running, and the ingredients all come from a portal hidden in your house. There's no release window, but we hope to get a "golden ticket" sometime this year. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

Judas

Following Bioshock creator Ken Levine's departure from Irrational Games and 2K, he quickly laid out ambitious but mysterious plans for a new game involving something he coined "narrative Legos." We've seen some footage of the game, and it seems to follow the events of a collapsing space station and the characters on it who are trying to make their way off.
BY KYLE HILLIARD

Dragon Age: Dreadwolf



While BioWare has remained quiet about the fourth mainline entry in the Dragon Age series, there's no doubt the game is still continuing its march toward release. The development team is promising size and scope far broader than in earlier entries, letting players journey across large swaths of Thedas. We've been promised a full reveal of the game this summer, and we can hope that the actual release won't be too far behind. **BY MATT MILLER**

The First Berserker: Khazan

Developer Neople and publisher Nexon are behind the next entry in the long-running Dungeon & Fighter universe. Unlike 2022's fighter, DNF Duel, The First Berserker: Khazan is a "hardcore action" RPG with anime-inspired visuals and a story of vengeance coming to PS5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC sometime in the future. Its bombastic action reminds me of my favorite anime fights, and I can't wait to play it. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

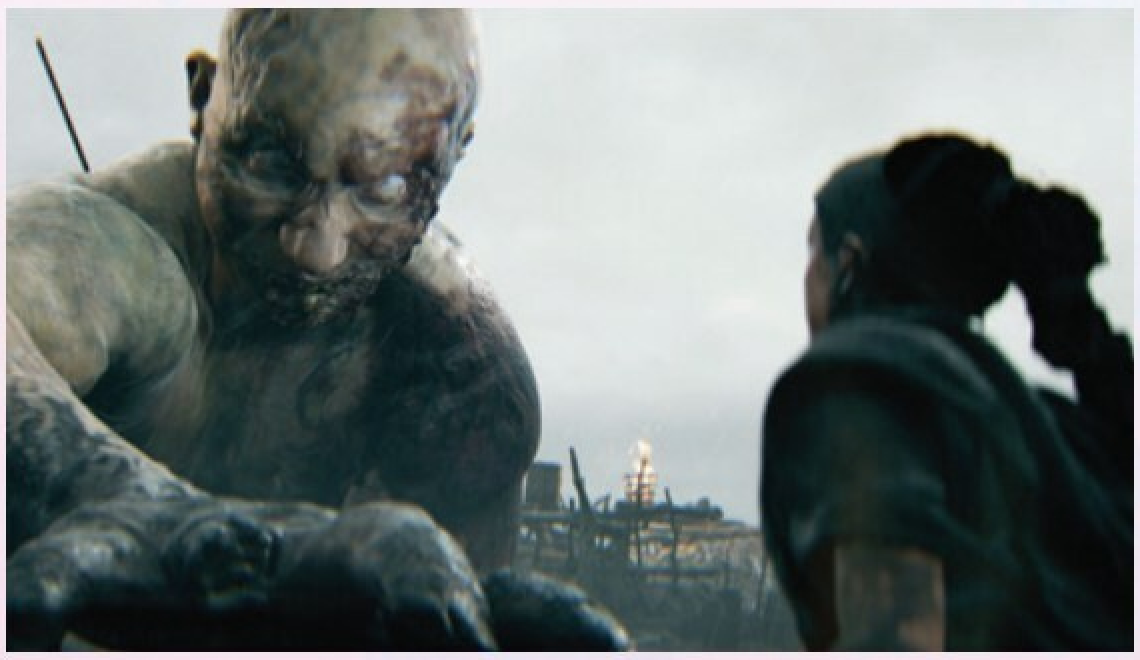
Senua's Saga: Hellblade II

The story goes on

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice had a conclusive ending. But the game was successful. So, of course, we're getting a sequel. And wouldn't you know it? It looks pretty great.

There's plenty you could extrapolate from the trailers about the game's lore, but personally, what interests me the most in any game from developer Ninja Theory is the simple fact it makes weird and very human games. If Senua's Sacrifice is anything to go on, Senua's Saga will likely feature a mind-bending portrayal of Norse mythology and its Scandinavian home. It's also likely to dive deep into the mind of protagonist Senua, exploring her struggles with psychosis – which the studio did to mostly success with its predecessor though there's always room for improvement.

The way the game continues the story of Hellblade sounds neat, but I can't wait to see the way Ninja Theory pushes its experimental gameplay. And especially how it pushes its tech. From the early days, the studio was always ahead of the curve when experimenting with how to use video game platforms, and now that it's working on a machine as powerful as the Xbox Series X/S and modern PCs, I can't wait to see what it comes up with. **BY BLAKE HESTER**



PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Xbox Game Studios **DEVELOPER** Ninja Theory **RELEASE** May 21

Star Wars Outlaws

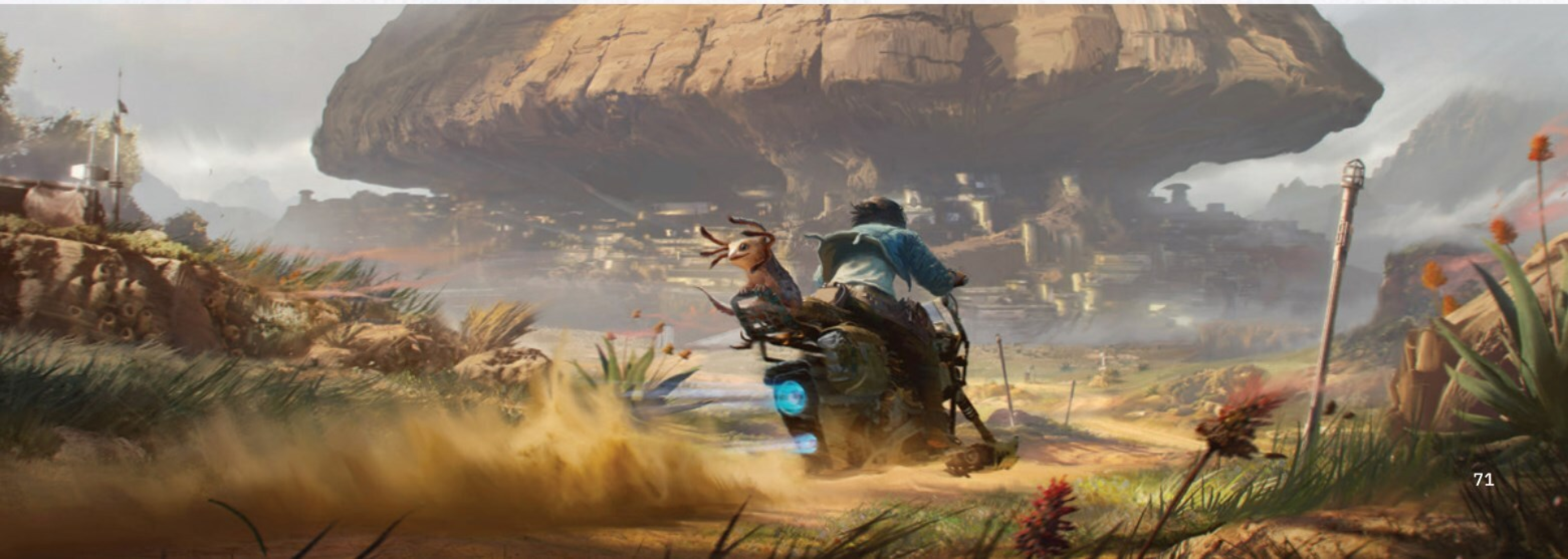
An open world far, far away

2023 gave us a great Star Wars experience with Jedi Survivor, but 2024 is looking just as promising for fans thanks to Ubisoft's ambitious open-world project. Star Wars Outlaws is set in the harrowing time frame between *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. With much of the galaxy focused on the civil war, scoundrel opportunists like protagonist Kay Vess have increased opportunities to make their fortune.

Players take Kay (and her adorable little companion Nix) across the Outer Rim of the Star Wars galaxy, visiting familiar locales like Tattooine and Akiva. The team at Massive Entertainment is also crafting a brand-new Star Wars world called Toshara, a moon that draws inspiration from the real-world Tanzania Savannah. Toshara is a windswept landscape of diverse alien species, with a capital city called Mirogana, carved out of a massive rock that dominates the plains.

Early gameplay reveals lots of variety, from racing across the wilderness on a hoverbike speeder, to stealth takedowns, to frenetic gun battles that feel rooted in Old West mythology. More than anything, I'm attracted to the opportunity to freely explore large and feature-rich environments in Star Wars fiction, all through the perspective of the seedy underworld, rather than the Jedi and soldiers that so often take the limelight. **BY MATT MILLER** ■

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Massive Entertainment **RELEASE** 2024



Reviews

spotlight

72 PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN // **74** ASGARD'S WRATH 2 // **75** TEKKEN 8 // **76** THE FINALS
77 DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: THE DARK PRINCE // **77** APOLLO JUSTICE: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY

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GI MUST PLAY

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

A royal resurgence

The Prince of Persia series has a long and storied history going back decades, and I know none of it. The latest, Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown, from developer Ubisoft Montpellier, has me regretting that because if this game indicates what else awaits me in the franchise, I've clearly been missing out. The Lost Crown uses exhilarating platforming, a deep combat loop, and more to create a new Metroidvania classic. While I would like a more compelling story and a few tweaks to its systems, I struggled to put The Lost Crown down, taking my gameplay sessions into the late hours of the night. The Lost Crown is a fascinating and highly successful reemergence for the beloved series. .

Notably, you do not play as the Prince of Persia in The Lost Crown; instead, you control Sargon, one of the seven Immortals, elite warriors who protect Persia, its Queen Thomyris, and the titular Prince Ghassan. However, Ghassan is kidnapped, sending the Immortals to Mount Qaf, where a labyrinthian adventure awaits Sargon. One of my favorite parts of The Lost Crown was watching the foggy map of Mount Qaf reveal itself as a series of connected hallways, hidden chambers, and platforming puzzle playgrounds, in part because exploring all of it was an absolute treat. However, I would have liked a better fast-travel system, and sometimes there's too much backtracking.

Combat starts simple, with a heavy emphasis on parrying, but grows into a deep system of extended ground attacks, air combos, projectile combo extenders, fast dash-kicks, and more. Amulets with special properties, powerful Athra Surge attacks, and Sargon's time powers round out the excellent tool kit.

Like the various puzzles of Mount Qaf, every encounter presents its own predicament; I had to think fast and attack faster to take down new enemies with moves I hadn't seen. And bosses are the combat's crème de la crème. Each boss capped off the learning experience The Lost Crown put me through in the preceding hours, requiring the use of every tool in my arsenal.

The same can be said for its platforming. Quick respawning and instant resets carve out the worst parts of platformers, leaving a trial-and-error experience that remains highly rewarding throughout the game. A tough-as-nails platforming section that requires perfect precision might lead you to a rare currency that helps you strengthen Sargon's swords, a special petal that increases his total health, or even a miniboss; I was never disappointed with what awaited me, a critical component to an enriching Metroidvania experience.

With a robust suite of accessibility options, like the ability to adjust the parry window timing or portals that let you skip platforming sections, you can fine-tune The Lost Crown to be the experience you want. It's a commendable effort and speaks to Ubisoft's Montpellier's innovation in this ever-growing genre. Memory Shards, which act like in-universe screenshots for Mount Qaf and pins you can attach to the map, create a feature set I want in every game like this moving forward.

The story, despite some twists and turns that genuinely surprised me, fell into the background too often, and I struggled to understand why I was going somewhere beyond the objective marker on my screen. But this and its few other issues did little to hamper my enjoyment.

The Lost Crown makes it hard to put the controller down, constantly urging players to follow its paths just a little further. Following its persistent pull to explore more of Mount Qaf is easy, though, thanks to how good it feels to do so. Between its first-rate platforming and engaging combat and progression, The Lost Crown's various parts coalesce into a sublime loop. Gameplay is king, and this Prince of Persia understands that. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

9.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Montpellier **RELEASE** January 18 **RATING** T

ASGARD'S WRATH 2

Worthy of the gods

Asgard's Wrath 2 stands out in a sea of virtual reality titles available on the market today. As the showcase piece for the Meta Quest 3, this sequel offers an experience rarely seen in the category, weaving together an exciting blend of action, intricate puzzle design, and semi-open-world environments. With the clever use of VR mechanics, you discover new surprises even after playing for dozens of hours. Asgard's Wrath 2 is a VR game that's difficult to put down, even as the Quest 3's battery life often requires you to. However, while it does start out strong, it hits a few stumbling blocks along the way.

Asgard's Wrath 2 immediately follows the events of the first game. The god of mischief, Loki, has managed to escape, and it's up to you to track him down. The big difference now is that your journey takes you to the vast sand seas of Egypt, where you meet other deities willing to help you in your search.

As you play through Asgard's Wrath 2, you control distinct heroes with their respective narrative arcs. You also meet various helpful animal companions, such as a boar that can wade through lava and a panther that can cause illusory blocks to solidify. These concepts, in terms of traversal and puzzle-solving, make each companion's functions quite unique, though the A.I. noticeably fumbles during battles. In some cases, they won't even attack an enemy right next to them until you manually target that foe.

Combat mechanics push the boundaries of what VR gameplay can be, thanks to each hero's assortment of weapons. This arsenal creates genuinely unique and refreshing playstyles. For instance, I'd get into the thick of the fray as Abraxas, slashing with a whip-sword in my right hand while tossing axes with my left. Surprisingly enough, the most mechanically complex character was an undead scribe named Djehuty; I had to place both hands in front of my headset and make a pulling motion to decapitate the character; then, I could use the head to possess foes.

Regrettably, I had a few issues with the controls, especially when grabbing weapons, since the controller has difficulty detecting the action unless I sit upright. Likewise, throwing weapons or firing projectiles, even with aim assist options enabled, became frustrating and tiring.

Still, the most fascinating feature of Asgard's Wrath 2 is its puzzles, which show what can truly be achieved by VR games in terms of immersion, creativity, and engagement. Since you're playing as a god, you can use your divine form to take control of larger structures, often switching to your hero character, who then traverses the area with the help of animal companions. The highest praise I can give Asgard's Wrath 2 is that, at times, it feels like the Zelda VR game enthusiasts have been waiting for. Major puzzles are presented as grand set pieces – moments that filled me with wonder upon reaching these sections and a sense of satisfaction upon coming up with a solution.

Sadly, the sheer abundance of puzzles leads to poor pacing during specific segments, such as escaping a dungeon's traps, only to realize that another brain teaser awaited instead of a climactic boss battle. The game's last few chapters also feel rushed compared to the arcs of the first two heroes.

Asgard's Wrath 2 still boasts an epic campaign that can take upwards of 70 hours to complete, chockful of numerous locales, lairs, and secrets to discover. Likewise, an infinitely replayable roguelike mode is waiting for you well after you're done with the campaign and the overworld areas. In spite of a few qualms, Asgard's Wrath 2 remains an offering worthy of the gods. **BY JASON RODRIGUEZ**

9

PLATFORM Quest 3 • Quest 2 **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Oculus Studios
DEVELOPER Sanzaru Games **RELEASE** December 15 **RATING** M

TEKKEN 8

Aggressively absurd

The bar for the fighting game genre has been uppercut to astronomical heights in recent years. Exceptional one-on-one combat remains the primary bullet point, but other series have complimented their packages with robust suites of destinations, from cinematic story campaigns to comprehensive training dojos. Although Tekken 8's fighting remains a treat thanks to some neat tweaks to its strong formula, the rest of the package, while respectable, falls short of some of its contemporaries.

The Heat system is the big new addition, adding a new gauge that, when activated, adds chip damage to attacks, buffs your blocks, and even adds follow-up moves to extend certain combos. My favorite use is spending the full meter to unleash a unique and powerful combo attack and weaving this into an assault can be devastating. Heat offers a fun and effective new trick that rewards aggression while also countering an opponent's relentless assault.

Rage Arts has been smartly simplified to a universal button for easier execution and more spectacular finishes. Another good tweak is that health bars are divided into sections displaying recoverable and non-recoverable HP, the former of which is replenished by attacking (even if blocked). I like seeing when I should turn up the heat to regain a few hit points. I also like being encouraged to end an opponent before they can heal themselves, once again promoting aggression in a way that speaks to my playstyle.

As far as the basic meat and potatoes go, if you want some good old-fashioned Tekken, this eighth entry delivers. The 32-character roster feels as great as it ever has, and new faces, such as the enigmatic Reina or the coffee-obsessed Azucena, are fun additions I'm enjoying mastering. Tekken 8 also scores a win in the looker category. Powered by Unreal Engine 5, our favorite combatants have never looked better.

Tekken 8's cinematic story mode, centering on the ultimate clash between Jin and Kazuya, trounces Tekken 7's story and is delightfully outrageous. It's an uneven experience, however. A choose-your-fighter tournament arc in the middle is a cool idea, but your selection is meaningless. A gigantic battle reminiscent of *Avengers: Infinity War* unfolds as a generic, ill-designed brawler where players pummel waves of foes in a manner reminiscent of Tekken 3's Tekken Force mode and feels just as dated. The final confrontation, while epic, drags on for so many rounds that it becomes a slog.

Arcade Quest offers another narrative-driven quest better suited for teaching players the ropes. As a customizable Xbox 360-esque avatar, you and your Tekken-obsessed friends travel to various arcades to climb the ranks of the competitive scene while learning the power of friendship and having fun. It does a decent job of providing tutorials on new mechanics like the Heat system and general fight psychology. The downside is suffering through a supremely bland tale that feels more like a saccharine lesson in fighting game etiquette (i.e., let people play how they want and don't be a jerk) for kids.

As a complete package, Tekken 8 doesn't reach the heights of recent rivals like Street Fighter 6 and Mortal Kombat 1. Character Episodes, Tekken Ball, a practice mode, and online play all function well but are exactly what you'd expect and shallow in some instances. But when the match begins, and you're exploiting openings to unleash flashy combo strings and air juggles, it remains a thrilling, if very familiar, one-on-one experience. The latest King of Iron Fist tournament still has work to do to feel wholly satisfying or ground-breaking, but it remains a fun arena to test your mettle against friends and rivals. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

8.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Fighting
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Bandai Namco **RELEASE** January 26 **RATING** T

MUST PLAY

THE FINALS

Appetite for destruction

The Finals offers rare novelty in the competitive multiplayer genre, encouraging creative strategies impossible in other titles because of its immense environmental destruction, physics-based hazards, and armory of whimsical gadgets. This first-person shooter occurs amid a digital game show where varying counts of three-person teams fight over money caches in an objective-focused format. The Finals is unpredictable in the best way: gameshow events like meteor showers or orbital lasers remap previously memorized paths, map variants like moving platforms or suspended structures can obfuscate objectives, and your team's best-laid defensive plans are often interrupted as explosives obliterate the buildings around you.

Developer Embark Studios showcases its mastery of Unreal Engine with gorgeously lit, fully destructible level designs that are incredibly fun to maneuver. Monaco, Las Vegas, Seoul, and Skyway Stadium – the four maps present at release – require distinct strategies and feature randomized elements that make every match impressively dynamic. You might load a map and find it under construction or unrecognizable, such as when sandstorms cover Vegas with enormous dunes.

The game features three unique classes: Heavy, Medium, and Light. Heavies can equip a rocket-propelled grenade, flamethrower, energy shield, a massive sledgehammer, or a glue gun that allows the user to create makeshift walls and cover. Mediums most closely resemble a support role, featuring the option to equip a healing beam, automated turret, zipline systems, jump pads, and defibrillators for quick revives. Lastly, the Light class specializes in grappling hook traversal and multiple invisibility gadgets. Each role is satisfying to explore, offering numerous possibilities for emergent play. Witnessing brilliant synergies like propelling the Cashout – an ATM-like objective – toward the opposite side of the arena by using the Heavy's rocket to bounce the object atop a Medium's well-placed jump pad leaves me energized and curious. Ultimately, team collaboration is crucial in finding success in The Finals since the skill ceiling becomes much higher with these potent equipment combinations.

It's incredibly satisfying to interrupt an enemy team's attempt at stealing the Cashout by blowing the floor from beneath them with an RPG or C4 pack and ambushing them as they unexpectedly fall to a lower level. On the flip side, you can avoid a perilous fall with a well-timed goo grenade, creating a makeshift floor or bridge where one didn't exist before. The reactive, high-stakes strategies the physics system facilitates remind me of the breakneck decisions that define the best fighting games.

Ignoring current multiplayer trends, The Finals features sturdy health bars, long respawn times, the exclusion of multiple weapon slots, and a lack of scopes on most guns. While using iron sights on larger weapons like the M60 light machine gun is sometimes tricky because the optic's alignment markers obscure my view, I admire Embark's commitment to novelty through these choices, as they reinforce a focus on gadgets, environmental destruction, and the creative strategies that emerge from the intersection of those features.

However, in a game with many well-designed characteristics, Embark's use of generative A.I. text-to-speech voicework is unappealing. The game show's characters sound believable at best but broadly fall flat due to one-note performances and mediocre writing. Additionally, I've heard duplicate voice lines multiple times, making the developer's use of generative art largely pointless.

Notably, the cosmetic microtransactions are fairly priced and offer robust character customization. Whether earning a new skin via the battle pass or purchasing it from the in-game shop, you can equip various parts of the outfit and pair them with others. Despite the slow progression of the battle pass, which I hope is adjusted in the future, the mix-and-match nature of its rewards makes them exciting to unlock.

The Finals has given me some of my favorite multiplayer moments of the year. Whether actively engaging in vertical combat or excitedly scaling rooftops on the way to the next objective, navigating the environments feels incredible, and the thrill of watching the ground disappear from below my feet never gets old. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 12-Player Online Shooter
PUBLISHER Embark Studios **DEVELOPER** Embark Studios **RELEASE** December 7 **RATING** T

DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: THE DARK PRINCE

By rigidly following Dragon Quest traditions, we end up with flat, cartoonish characters who inhabit a repetitive, cyclical world. But The Dark Prince plays to its strengths to deliver a solid RPG experience with a cozy narrative seasoned by a long list of charismatic creatures and entertaining dungeons. **BY PAULO KAWANISHI**

7

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix **RELEASE** December 1 **RATING** E10+

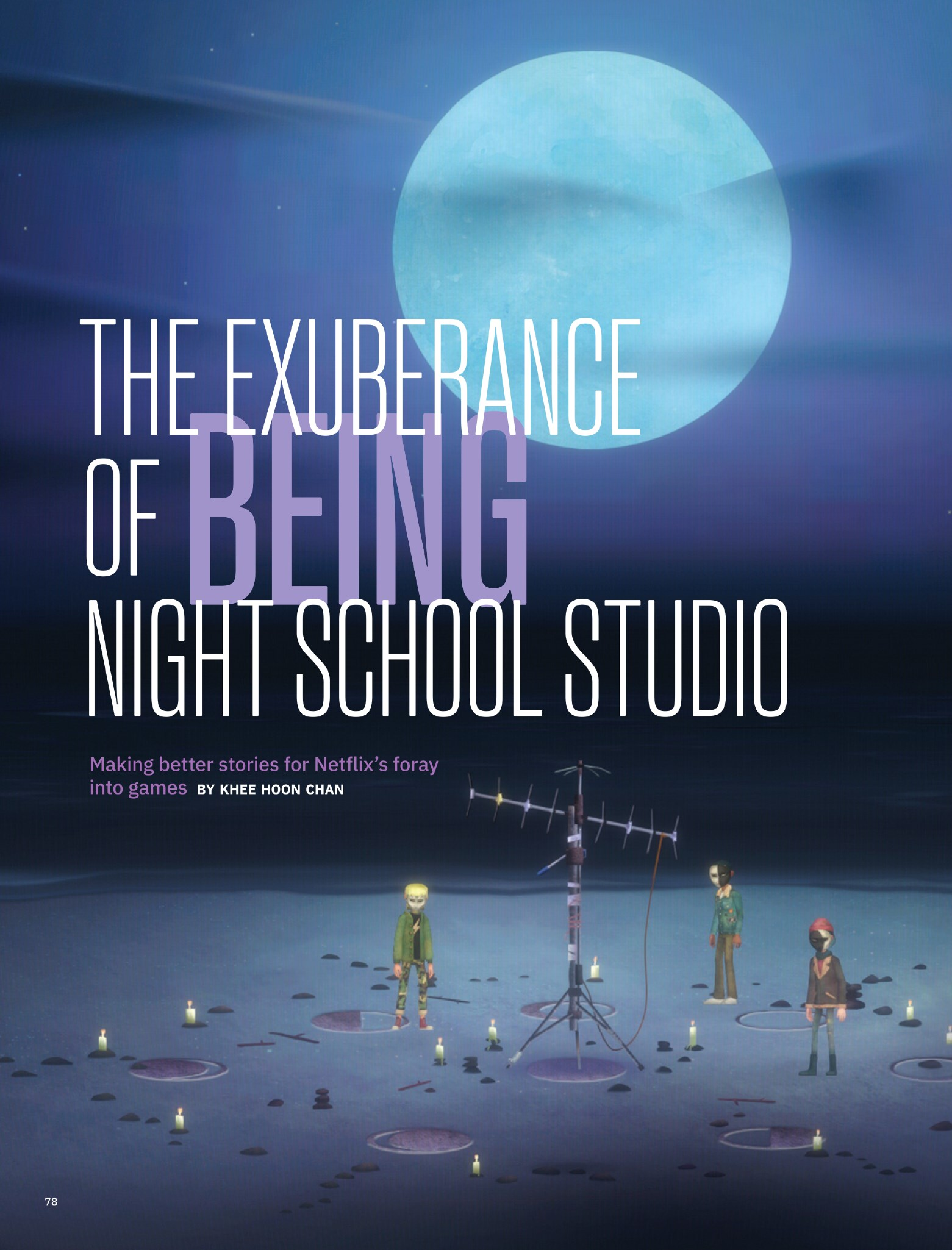
GI MUST PLAY

APOLLO JUSTICE: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY

Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney Trilogy succeeds at everything it sets out to do, bringing three great games to modern consoles in their most approachable forms to date. Even though not every trial is a winner, the majority are, and with a new suite of quality-of-life improvements, it's never been easier or more enjoyable to experience Apollo Justice's journey. **BY CHARLES HARTE** ■

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure/Puzzle
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom **RELEASE** January 24 **RATING** T



THE EXUBERANCE OF BEING NIGHT SCHOOL STUDIO

Making better stories for Netflix's foray into games

BY KHEE HOON CHAN

ADAM DOUGLAS HAS A GHASTLY SECRET. He shared the recipe for a Cuban dish – the Arroz con Pollo – in an in-game radio station in Oxenfree II: Lost Signals, and it's one that he describes as "very controversial." The trick, according to Douglas, a senior writer at Night School Studio, is to use boneless, skinless chicken thighs for the dish instead of bone-in, skin-on thighs and drumsticks.

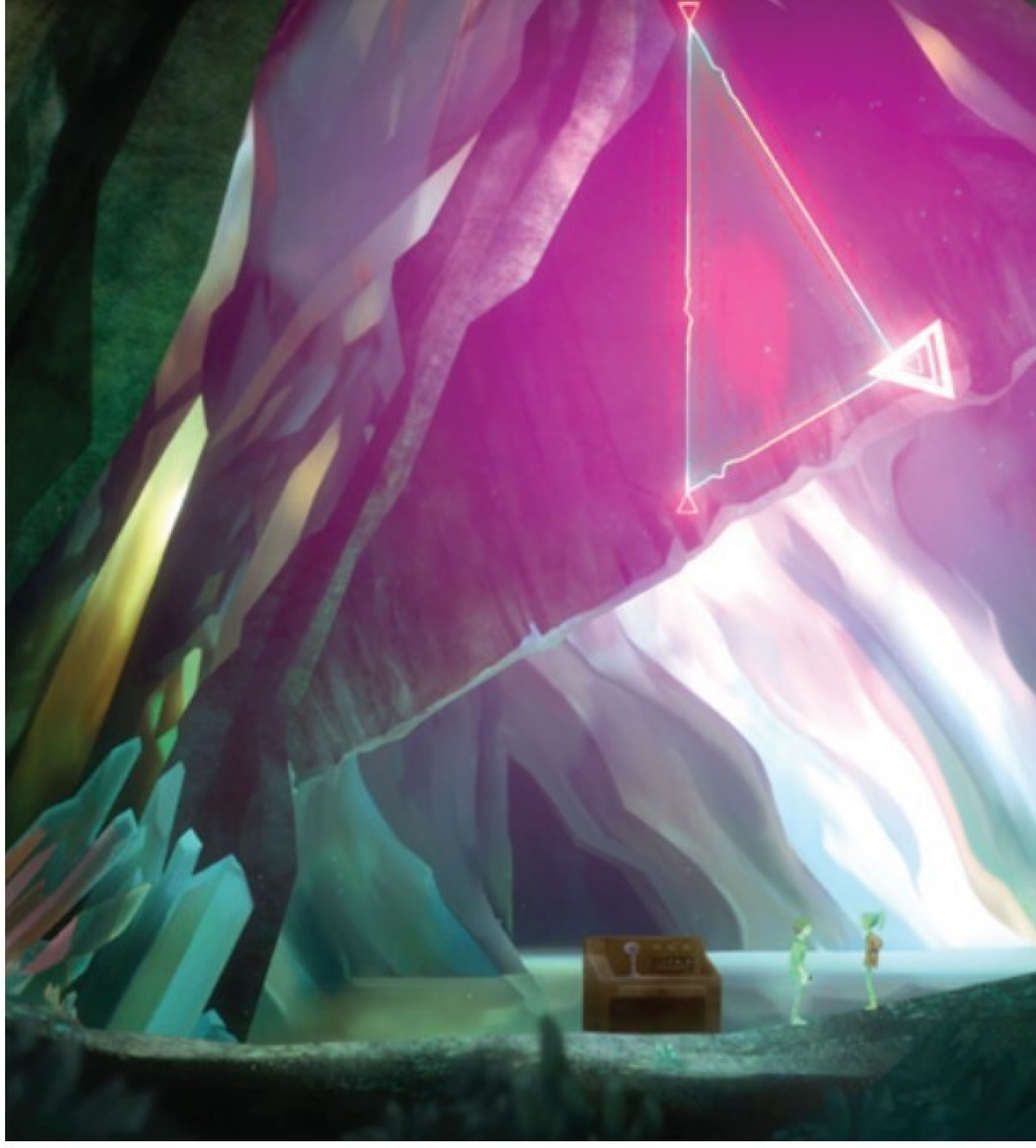
"My family's from Cuba," says Douglas. "It was my mom's recipe that I have transformed into my recipe. And so, the version in the game is my version, which in the Cuban community is a very controversial version, and I stand by it. I still haven't told my mom about any of this, by the way. I'm genuinely afraid of telling her this."

In between chuckles, Douglas' colleague Sara Hebert, the publishing and marketing lead at Night School, promises to send a copy of this story to his mother.

NETFLIX
OXENFREE II
LOST SIGNALS
NETFLIX
OXENFREE II
LOST SIGNALS

Night School co-founders Adam Hines (left), Sean Krankel (right), and Oxenfree II game director Bryant Cannon (middle) at Summer Game Fest Play Days 2023

Top: Afterparty



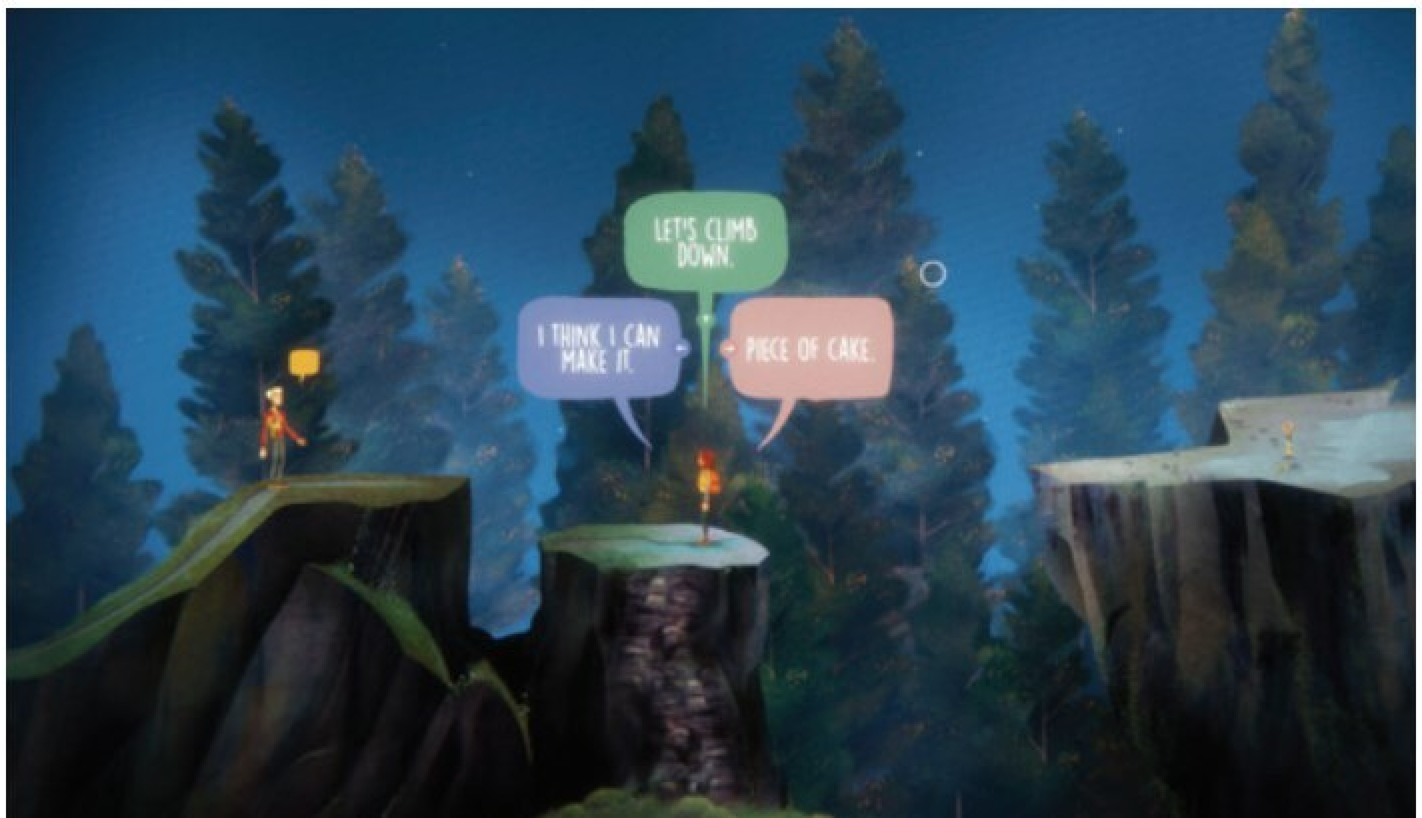
Charming Chatter, Flawed Heroes

In some ways, this closeness feels like an influence on the games Night School is known for, which often feature relatable, ordinary characters banding together in otherworldly, extraordinary circumstances. Oxenfree stars a teenager, Alex, embarking on a weekend trip with a group of friends to a local island, only to accidentally unleash a series of paranormal events. Its sequel is about a much older and stoic adult named Riley, who navigates similar supernatural happenings with her coworker, Jacob. Then there's Afterparty, in which college best buds Milo and Lola drink their way out of Hell. These adventures feature conversations taking place organically; dialogue is the crux of the game rather than an auxiliary feature to nudge the plot along.

This is the very DNA of Night School: a vision founders Krankel and Adam Hines hoped to realize from the very start.

"I've been talking to Adam for years about wanting to start something [...] at that time, you had Telltale Games, which were cutscene focused, and then sometimes [you] walk around and solve some puzzles, and then on the other end of the spectrum, I think Last Of Us had just come out maybe a year or two earlier, and that was the apex of what narrative and action gameplay could be together," says Krankel. "But we're looking right in the middle and going like, 'There's no games out there that don't have cutscenes, but yet have lots of stories that work really well.'"

↓
Oxenfree,
Oxenfree II



Night School's most acclaimed feature is its dialogue tree system, which mimics the cadence of real-life chatter. Words are exchanged even as characters wander about their environments, and any lulls in conversations become meaningful; as Riley in Oxenfree II, for instance, you can even choose to ignore Jacob's attempts at small talk and simply not respond if it's proving too incessant. Conversations, too, can be interrupted when new distractions are introduced – spotting a new clue or pointing out a familiar landmark – causing them to diverge in different directions. At times, the focus on dialogue almost feels like a bold decision, which places incredible faith in the charisma of the games' characters. After all, a deathly boring or unlikable cast may well be a death knell for the game.

Fortunately for many Night School games, their cast lacks a certain air of pretension – a quality plaguing many video game heroes today. Douglas attributes this to the flaws deliberately written into Night School protagonists.

"[Riley from Oxenfree II] has made mistakes as we all have," he says. "She's endeavoring to do better, as some of us try to do, and some of us don't. And in some ways, she succeeds, and [in] some ways, she really doesn't. And I think keeping that in mind, that life is complicated, it can be messy, it very rarely goes the way that you think it is. It is part of what made her, in my opinion, just so relatable and so human."

But for all its successes with spearheading deeply authentic conversations, Krankel seems reluctant to peg Night School games as predominantly dialogue-driven stories, admitting this trajectory may change for the studio's future games.

"Story is critical, and even talking is critical, but the idea of wall-to-wall, highly verbose gameplay that you see in Afterparty or Oxenfree and Oxenfree II, I think we're pretty malleable on that," he says.

SAW THE MON
BUT NOT

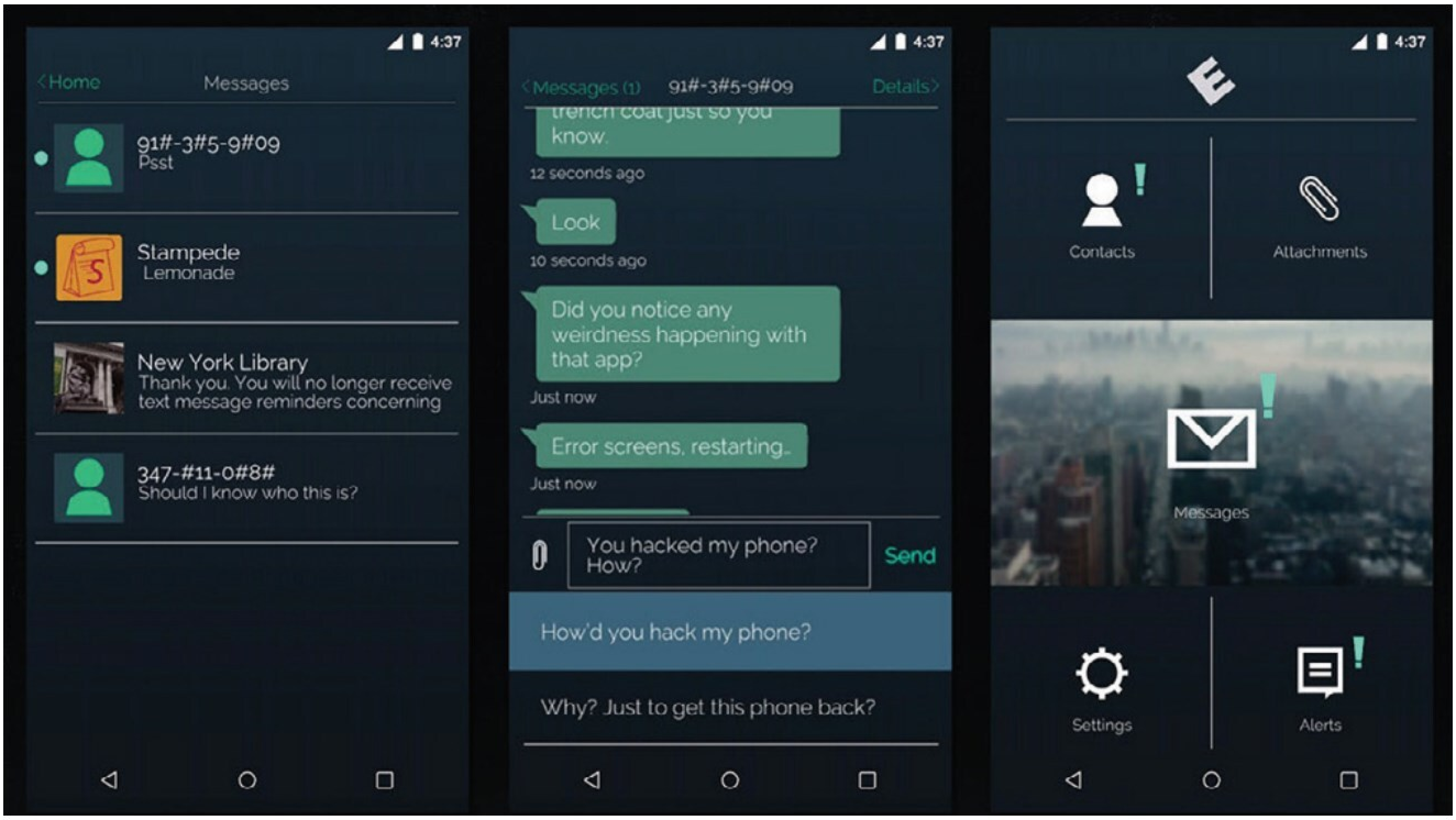
Scrappy Beginnings

As with many indie developers, Night School hails from humble beginnings, with the team working on the first Oxenfree out of Krankel's kitchen. Krankel was previously co-workers with Cannon at Disney, as well as Oxenfree environment artist Heather Gross, while Hines (Krankel's cousin) was fresh out of Telltale Games. In 2016, Oxenfree was released to critical acclaim. This was quickly followed by a *Mr. Robot* mobile game, Robot:1.51exfiltrati0n, inspired by the popular television thriller, and the one game Krankel reckons is Hines' crowning achievement at Night School (the game has since been delisted from both Android and iOS app stores). It was also around this time that Telltale acquired the rights to make a *Stranger Things* game, with Night School contracted to develop a companion game. Telltale's unexpected shuttering, however, meant Night School was unable to bring the game to fruition.

Night School was understandably reticent about that episode, but Krankel lets in that the game was "semi-far along" in development, and was going to be closely tied to Telltale's Stranger Things in some capacity. "The gist of it, that I'll say, is just that they were making a big *Stranger Things* game and reached out to us about making a small one that could talk to the big one. And it was really cool. It was really interesting how the two games might have talked to each other [...] in a very compelling way."

This *Stranger Things* companion game was built upon Robot:1.51exfiltrati0n, which unveiled its events through the discovery of a discarded burner phone, alongside text messages and conversations playing out in real time.

In a way, this was another attempt by Night School to explore different ways of fleshing out dialogues – a vision that felt quintessentially Night School. "That was a foundation that we've never wanted to fully leave behind, but we haven't done anything with that general design for years," says Krankel. "It's something now that we're in the early stages of exploring [...] but the *Stranger Things* game that we were working on used that and took it a lot further."



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Psst

Stampede
Lemonade

New York Library
Thank you. You will no longer receive text message reminders concerning

347-#11-0#8#
Should I know who this is?

trench coat just so you know.

12 seconds ago

Look

10 seconds ago

Did you notice any weirdness happening with that app?

Just now

Error screens, restarting..

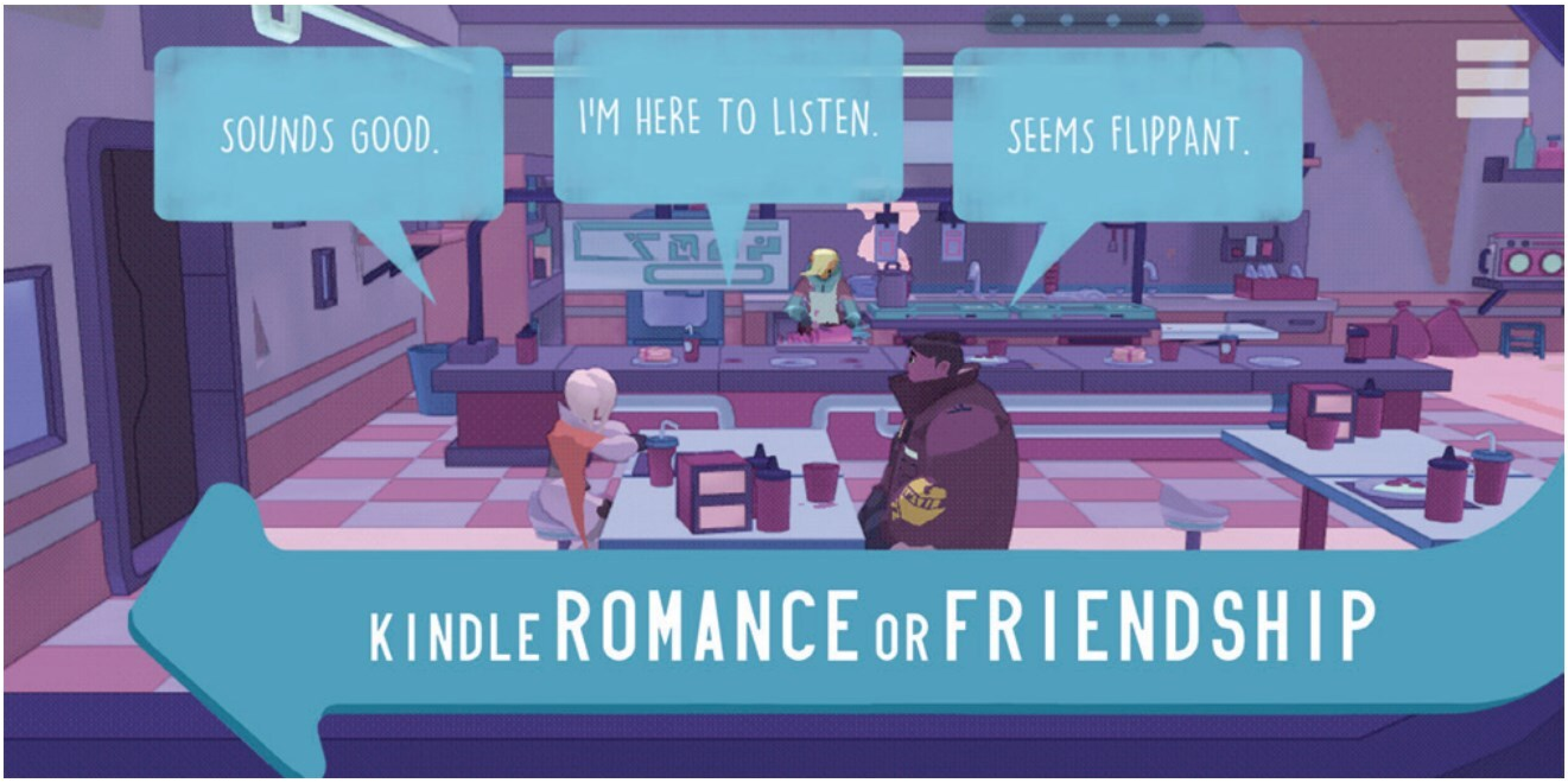
Just now

You hacked my phone? How?

How'd you hack my phone?

Why? Just to get this phone back?

↓ Robot:1.51exfiltrati0n



Netflix and The Cloud

Perhaps to Netflix, Night School's storytelling ethos is complimentary to its cloud gaming ambitions. Having dabbled with interactive storytelling with *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, the streaming giant eventually acquired the studio in 2021, with Night School being the first developer included under Netflix's growing roster of companies. Night School's portfolio seems particularly suited to cloud gaming for now, given the lack of twitchy mechanics and a heavy emphasis on narrative rather than the adrenaline-fuelled bombast of other games. At the moment, Oxenfree remains one of two games that are part of Netflix's beta test on making games playable on select television models, PCs, and Mac.

"Netflix is a story company. Netflix tells stories. They entertain the world with different types of stories," Krankel says. "We're a story company; we just happen to make playable ones. And so, the conversation turned into less of a 'Hey, we'd like to license your game,' and more like, 'Hey, would you like to do more stuff just for us? Would you like to keep using your general ethos in our bigger environment?' And that felt pretty good."

Acquisitions are usually met with some amount of trepidation, but as hackneyed as this may sound, those we spoke to at Night School agree it hasn't changed the studio in ways that aren't true to its identity. Instead, any changes stem from just being part of a bigger organization now.

"I have an answer that sounds facetious, but it's not. It's just that I'm in a lot more meetings now. That is not because of the Netflix acquisition," says Rohrmann. "That's just the nature of working for a larger organization. But yeah, other than that, I'm still making music the way I did before, so I'm super happy about that."

Cannon agrees. "I think it's changed, but not necessarily because of Netflix. It's just because we've grown and we've had to adapt to having more people at the studio, having a lot more different personalities at the studio and egos at the studio. And it's just new, it's something that a lot of studios have faced before. We've definitely had growing pains there, but it's also enabled us to do things that are in the future going to be that much bigger and more exciting for our players."

↓
Clockwise from top: Next Stop Nowhere

An example of dialogue localization in Oxenfree

The Night School Studios team

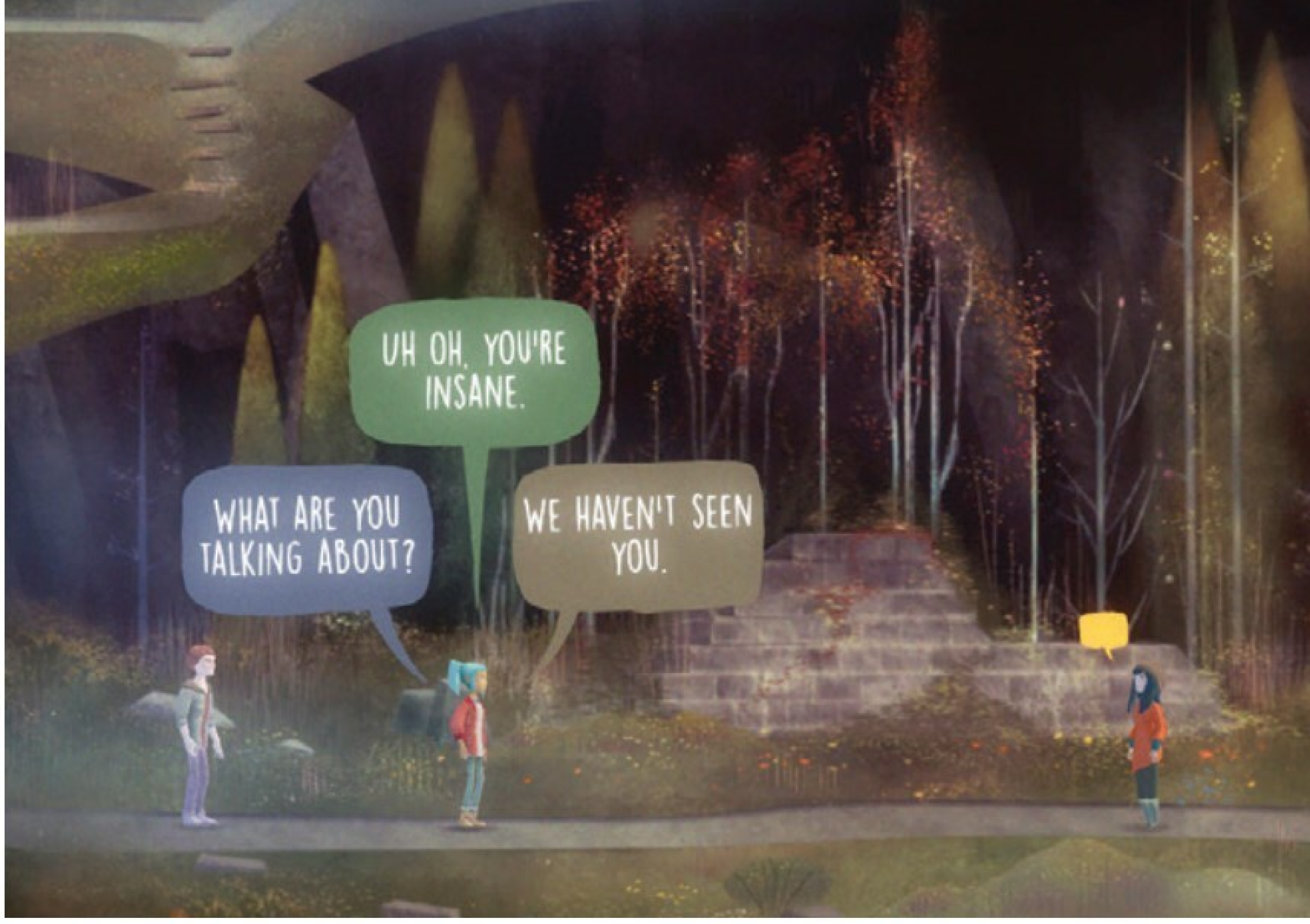
Night School co-foudners Sean Krankel (left) and Adam Hines (right) filming for a behind the scenes video in Los Angeles

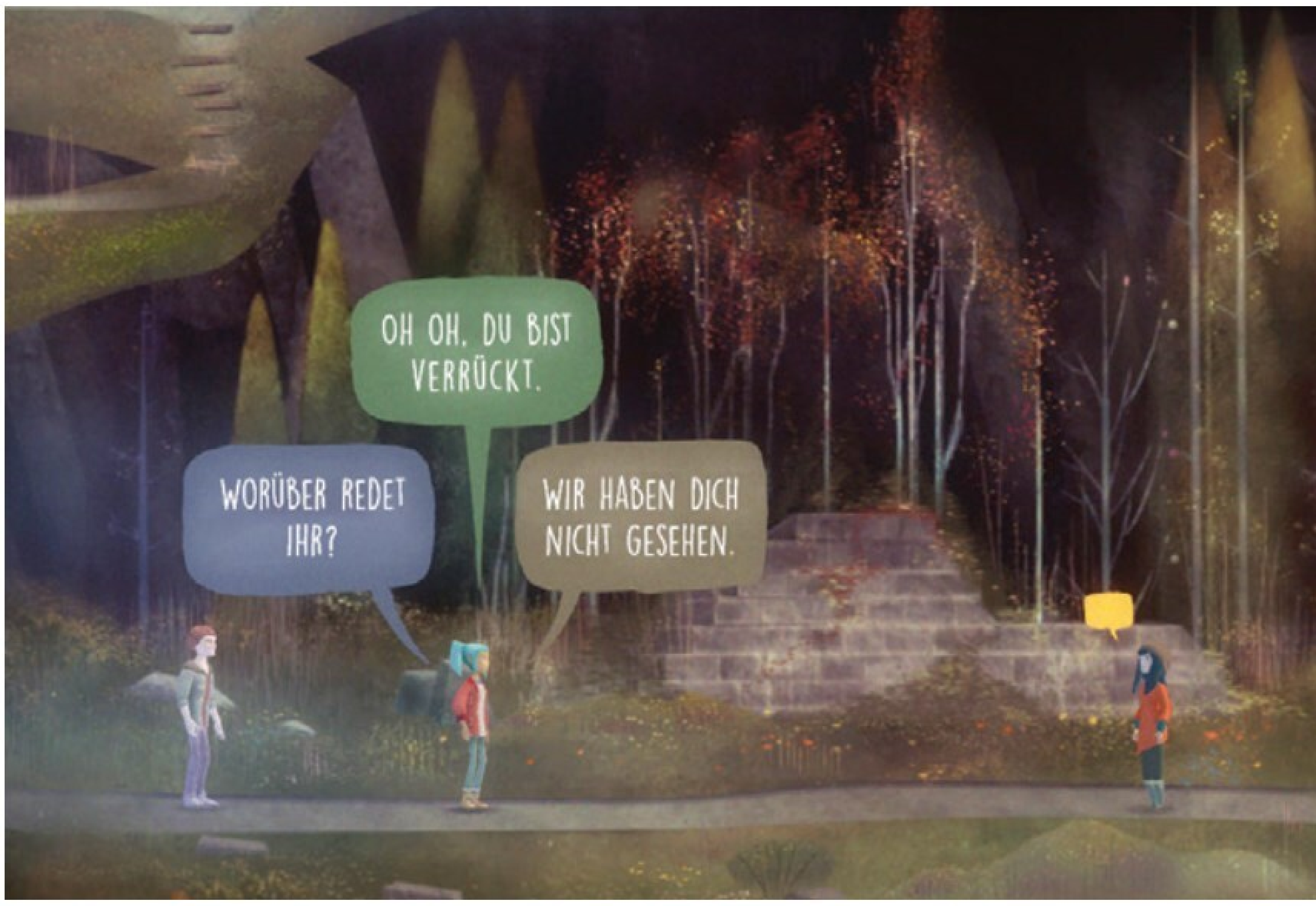
Changing Tides

That said, Netflix's cloud gaming efforts are still in its nascent stages. It hasn't been long since the demise of Google's cloud gaming experiment Stadia, but Night School seems largely optimistic about the deal. The acquisition has given the studio more resources and the means to refine its games. Take, for instance, how Oxenfree II was released in 32 languages – a feat that Krankel says would not have been possible without Netflix.

"Before, we were a tiny California company that, if we could scrounge up enough money to get localization funds, we would start putting the game out in other places, and we didn't even know if our localizations were that good, to be totally honest, because we were a small studio working with outsourcing teams. And now we're like, 'We can put our s**t everywhere, and we should do it, and we should do it right,'" says Krankel. He even points out the studio might very well be working on its dream game at the moment, with Cannon at the helm as its game director.

"I'd say when we were working out of Sean's kitchen, we never ever thought that we'd be here 10 years later. As big as we are, to me, it did not seem possible," says Cannon with a wistful smile. "And so, when I think about how much we've grown and how much more ability we have to make a big impact on the industry and players, it's helpful for me to think back to those days and think of that beginner's mindset we had, that was like, 'We don't know what we're doing, but we're so passionate about this. We care about it deeply.' And thinking about how much that mattered to me, and how much if I were to describe to [Bryant from] 10 years ago what would come of this, he'd be very, very happy. It's pretty incredible, and I don't want to forget those early days." ■





ONE LAST THING

THE GAMES WE KNOW NOTHING ABOUT

A FEW PAGES AGO, YOU READ OUR LIST OF THE MOST ANTICIPATED GAMES for 2024 and beyond. We focused on games we knew at least something about, but there's a whole other list of anticipated games that are near-total mysteries. In these cases, we might have a pre-rendered teaser or single image, a title or codename, and who is working on it, but that's about it. All we can do is hope for some concrete details soon.

Silent Hill f

- Assassin's Creed Hex *(Ubisoft Montreal)*
- Control 2 *(Remedy Entertainment)*
- Cyberpunk 2077: Project Orion *(CD Projekt Red)*
- Dragon Quest XII: The Flames of Fate *(Square Enix)*
- Marvel's Untitled Black Panther game *(Cliffhanger Games)*
- Marvel's Untitled Captain America/Black Panther game *(Skydance New Media)*
- Marvel's Untitled Iron Man game *(Motive Studio)*
- Marvel's Wolverine *(Insomniac Games)*
- Max Payne 1 and 2 Remake *(Remedy Entertainment)*
- Metroid Prime 4 *(Retro Studios)*
- Perfect Dark *(The Initiative, Crystal Dynamics)*
- Pragmata *(Capcom)*
- Professor Layton and the New World of Steam *(Level-5)*
- Project 007 *(IO interactive)*
- Project Hadar *(CD Projekt Red)*
- Silent Hill f *(NeoBards Entertainment Limited)*
- Splinter Cell Remake *(Ubisoft Toronto)*
- State of Decay 3 *(Undead Labs)*
- Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Last Ronin *(Black Forest Games)*
- The Elder Scrolls VI *(Bethesda Softworks)*
- The Outer Worlds 2 *(Obsidian Entertainment)*
- The Witcher: Project Canis Majoris *(Fool's Theory)*
- The Witcher: Project Sirius *(The Molasses Flood)*
- The Witcher 4: Polaris *(CD Projekt Red)*
- Transformers Reactivate *(Splash Damage, Bulkhead Interactive)*
- Untitled new BioShock *(Cloud Chamber Studios)*
- Untitled new Crysis *(Crytek)*
- Untitled new Mafia *(Hangar 13)*
- Untitled new Mass Effect *(BioWare)*
- Untitled new Tomb Raider *(Crystal Dynamics)*
- Wonder Woman *(Monolith Productions)* ■

NINTENDO SWITCH
PRINCESS PEACH
SHOWTIME!
PREMIERING ON 3/22/24
EVERYONE 10+
E 10+
ESRB
Fantasy Violence
Nintendo

Game and systems sold separately.
Nintendo Switch Lite plays all games that support handheld mode.
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